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SAINTS ROW
Hands-on with the highly anticipated reboot

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Repeating Decades

A THQ representative threw a question my way in early 2011: "Would you like to see the next Saints Row game?" At the time, the Saints Row series consisted of two games (both well-received), but it hadn't truly made its mark yet, and lived in the shadow of the similarly designed Grand Theft Auto series.

I was told this third game was "breaking the mold" and installing a whole new level of irreverent humor. I was intrigued by this pitch and soon found myself on the road, driving from Minneapolis, Minn., to Volition's headquarters in Champaign, Ill. to get my hands on the sequel.

I remember this trip vividly, more than any other during my 28-year tenure at *Game Informer*. An hour before heading to Volition, I had breakfast at my hotel's restaurant. THQ's then-president Danny Bilson had the same idea. As Volition's publisher, he was there to check in on the studios' numerous games. We sat together and chatted about video games, and I even asked him about his previous career as a movie writer (most notably penning the screenplay for *The Rocketeer*). As he talked about the old days, Danny waved someone to our table. Fellow screenwriter (and director) Guillermo del Toro pulled up a chair and sat with us. He was in town to work with Volition on a survival-horror game called Insane (sadly canceled years later). The three of us mostly talked about games and our different approaches to writing.

I couldn't wait to get back to *Game Informer*'s office to tell everyone about this breakfast, but it quickly became an afterthought once I saw Saints Row: The Third in action. I was blown away by the direction Volition was going with this sequel and thought the increased emphasis on the cooperative play gave it the potential to be a juggernaut. We took a deep dive into the game for our April 2011 cover story in the months ahead. By the end of 2012, Saints Row: The Third sold more than 5 million copies. To this day, it is regarded by most as the series' best installment.

Flash forward ten years, and after a hiatus, Volition is making Saints Row games again. The demo I was shown of this sequel/reboot screamed of the over-the-top action I loved from Saints Row: The Third. I walked away from that demo thinking this is the successor people have been wanting.

For this month's cover – much like Volition's return to form – we're repeating what we did a decade ago and are giving you a deep, hands-on dive into this wild open-world experience. I know the debut trailer gave people pause, but trust me when I say this reboot is as Saints Row as it gets, and we have the information to back that up.

I hope you enjoy the article and all the other great content we have packed into this issue.

As always, be well, be safe, and game on!

40 **Saints Row**
Seven years after the most recent Saints Row game, Volition is rebooting its flagship franchise. Read our cover story for an exclusive look inside this brand-new vision for the open-world mayhem generator. ***by Brian Shea***

10 A Vision Of PS5’s Future

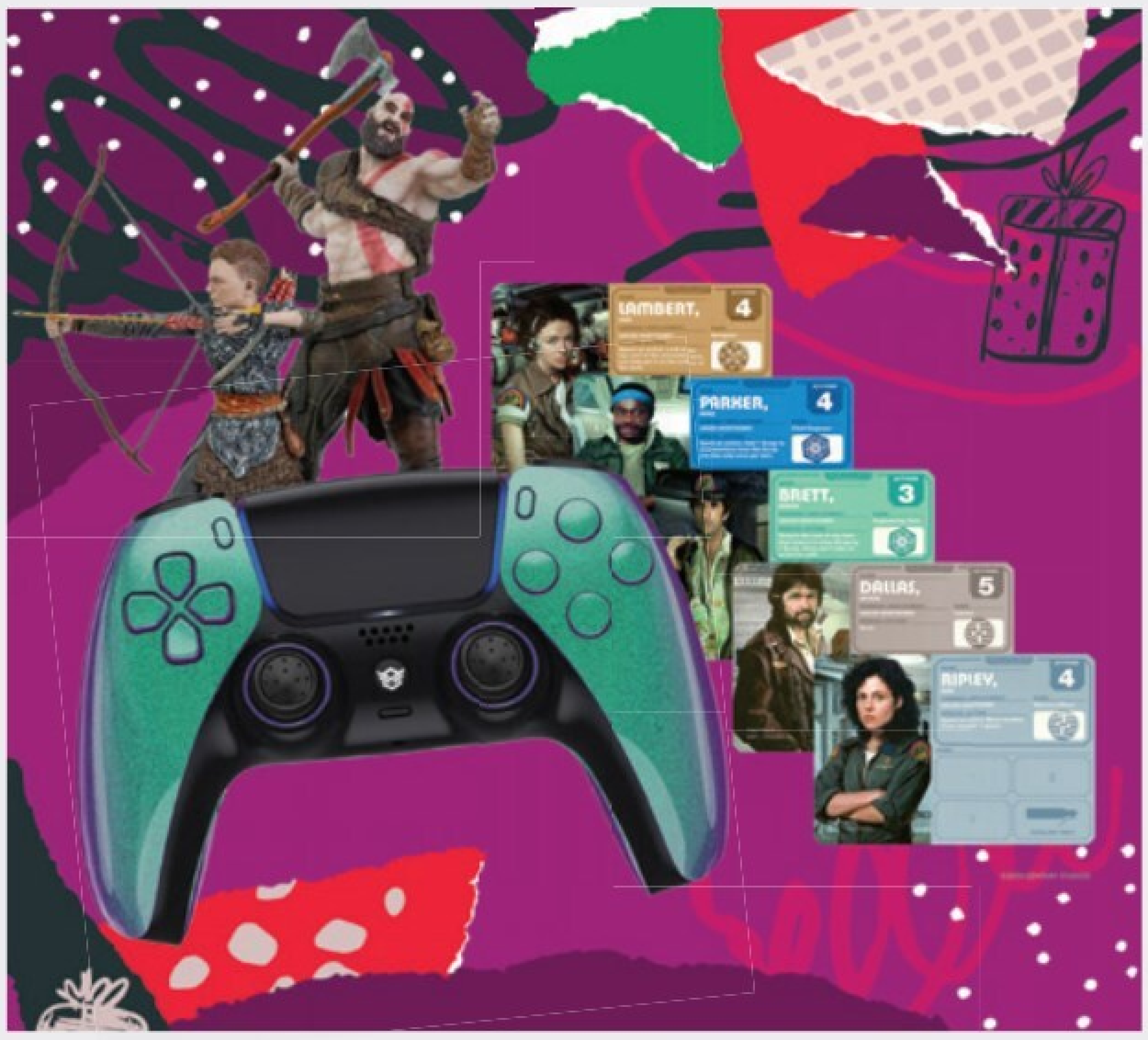
Sony recently gave us a taste of what’s next for PlayStation 5, including new God of War and Spider-Man games. If you missed it, we’ve compiled all the announcements you need to know about.

14 Sent Overseas

We talked to the localization experts behind series such as Yakuza and Ace Attorney about their jobs adapting Japanese games for American audiences.

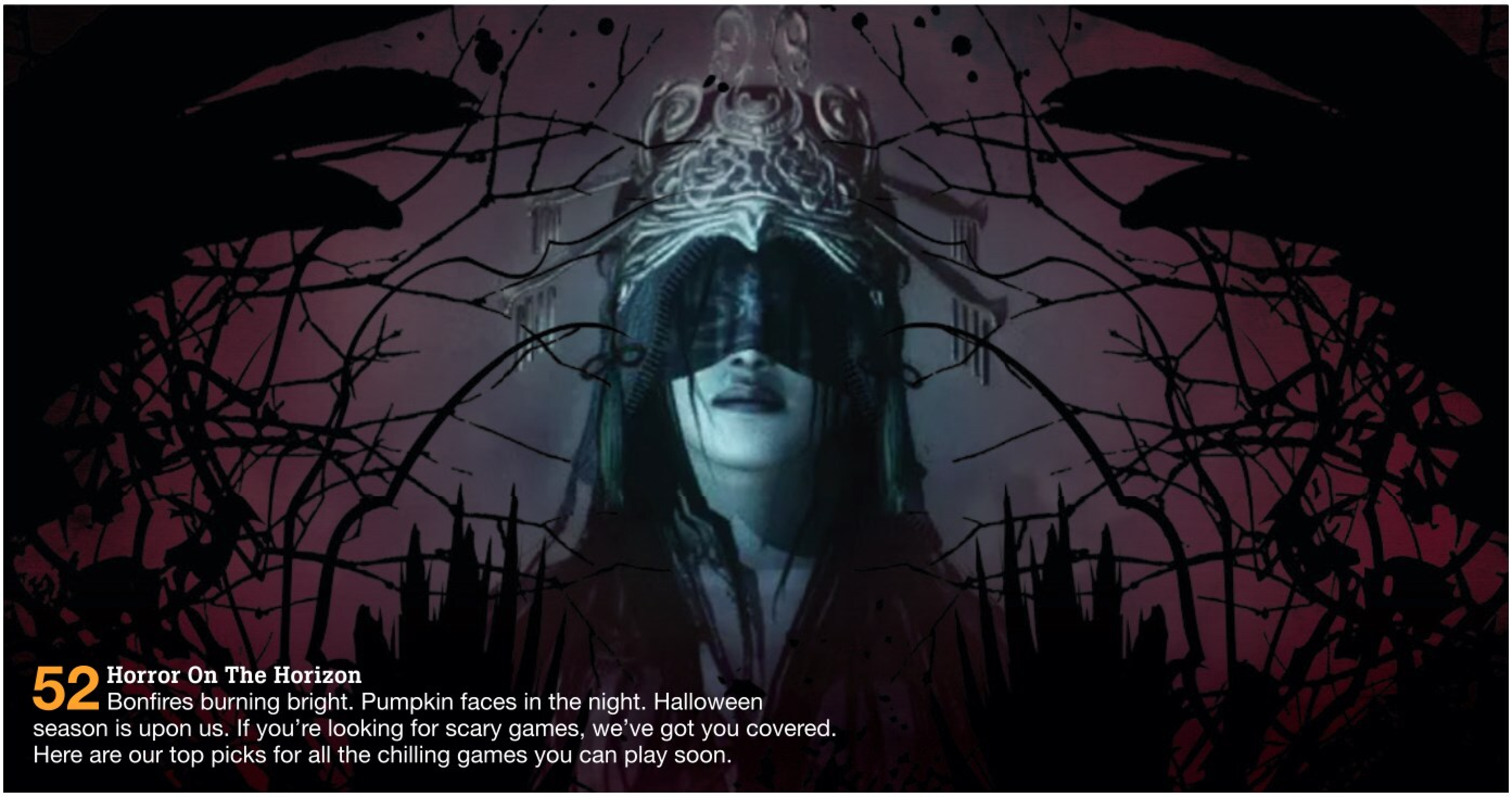
20 Creating Windows Of Opportunity

Splitgate came out of nowhere, taking over the industry seemingly overnight. We chatted with the team behind the game to get the inside story of how it all came together.



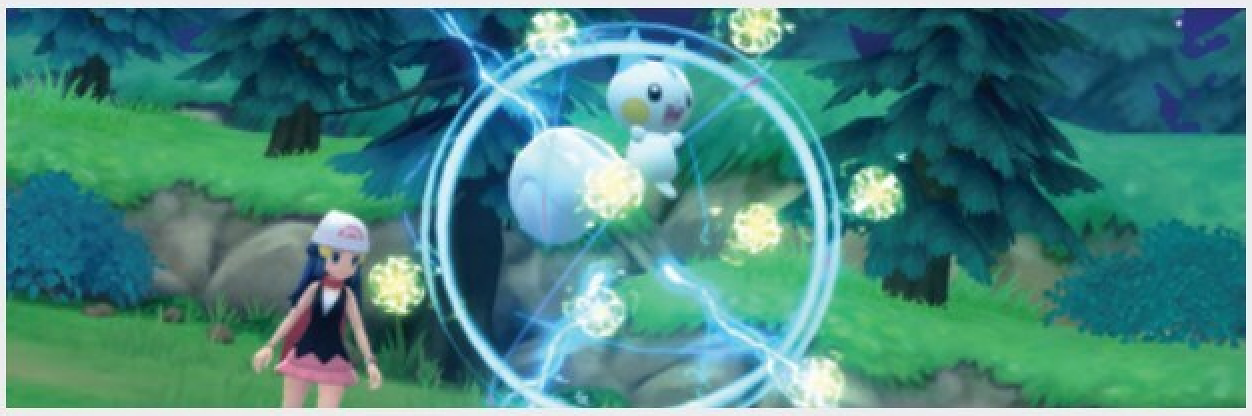
22 Holiday Buying Guide 2021

The most wonderful time of the year is almost here. Whether you’re shopping for yourself or loved ones, we’ve got a great selection of things to help you cross some names off your list.



52 Horror On The Horizon

Bonfires burning bright. Pumpkin faces in the night. Halloween season is upon us. If you’re looking for scary games, we’ve got you covered. Here are our top picks for all the chilling games you can play soon.



60 Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl
Get ready to revisit Sinnoh on Switch. Here's what you need to know about these upcoming remakes.

62 DokeV
We last saw this game at Gamescom, and we can't get it out of our minds. Check out our initial thoughts on this over-the-top and brilliantly animated upcoming action title.

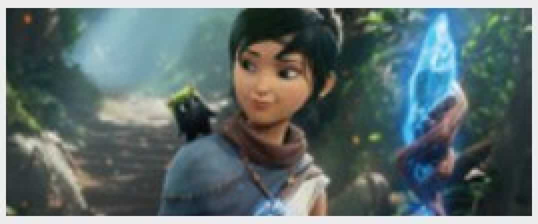
63 Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy
Eidos-Montréal's upcoming space adventure is almost here. Here's a final rundown of what you can expect.

64 Dying Light 2 Stay Human
It's been a long time coming for Dying Light 2 – and the wait isn't quite over yet. Nevertheless, there's a lot of reasons to be excited about Techland's upcoming zombie adventure.

70 Sifu
Remember the hallway scene in *Oldboy*? Sifu is kind of like that, but an entire game.

77 Deathloop
Arkane's latest game is one of the studio's best to date. Read our full review of this bloody timeloop thriller.

78 Tales Of Arise
Even though the series has been overshadowed for decades by other RPGs, the latest Tales game proves why the franchise is still one of the best around.



79 Kena: Bridge Of Spirits
A whimsical new adventure for PlayStation and PC. Discover why you shouldn't let this game slip under your radar.

80 Lost Judgment
The spin-off from the Yakuza franchise, the latest entry in the Judgment series swings for the fences a lot. Unfortunately, it also misses a lot.

81 Life Is Strange: True Colors
With a new character in a new city, the latest Life is Strange game has a lot of heart. Find out what we think of the latest entry in this emotional series.

06 **Feedback**

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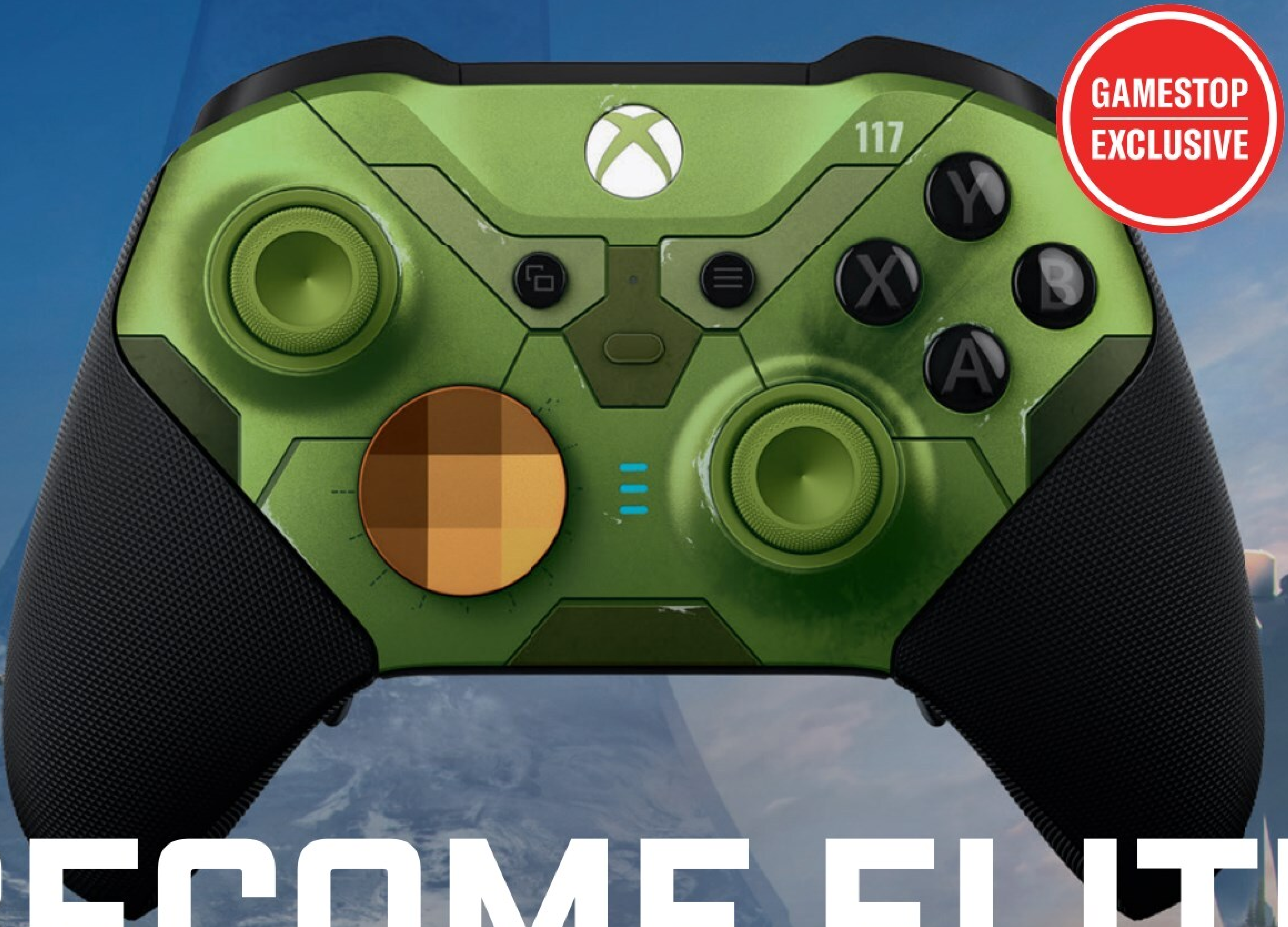
XBOX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feedback

This month our readers start the Game of the Year discussion, ponder the value of owning all three major consoles, and prepare to reenter The Matrix.

Marvel's Midnight Suns

It must be tough for a developer like Firaxis Games to move away from a successful franchise like XCOM to reinvent itself with Marvel's Midnight Suns. I'm sure some valuable learnings are shared between the two games, but the expectations from fans must be through the roof – not just from how the Marvel characters are handled, but from wanting something as unique as XCOM. Firaxis has long been one of my favorite developers, and I have faith they'll do well, but I also fear a situation like Crystal Dynamics went through with Marvel's Avengers. That game is still struggling to find a pulse, even though it's pretty darn good.

Cynthia Espineli
Ashland, OR

The Letter From the Editor insight Andrew Reiner provided into Disney making moves in the game space was a real eye-opener. After making a significant splash on the big screen with the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Disney conquered the small screen by continuing those stories in a new way on Disney+. A similar movement is happening in the game space, with some of the biggest developers making games for these Marvel characters. I have been to every Marvel movie on day one and love what is happening in games. Bring on more of them! Shang-Chi deserves a great game!

Michael Finestone
Mobile, AL

I know Insomniac Games' Spider-Man universe is a new take on the character, and the same goes for Crystal Dynamics' Avengers, but I love how unique Firaxis Games' Marvel's Midnight Suns looks. Not only does every character have a new look, but they also have a new name! I always enjoy it when new superhero teams are born in comics, but I never expected that to happen in games! I can't wait to see what they are all about and how this game explores the dark side of the Marvel universe!

Daniel Ward
Coronado, CA

We may be entering a golden age for superhero video games. The secret behind their successes will likely be the same: They aren't bound to a particular movie or comic and tell their own stories. We currently have Eidos-Montréal's Guardians of the Galaxy and Firaxis' Midnight Suns to look forward to in the months ahead. Down the road, Insomniac is giving us a Spider-Man sequel and a Wolverine game. Crystal Dynamics' Avengers also provides new entry points through expansions that focus on individual characters like Hawkeye and Black Panther. The one hero we feel deserves a game most right now is Daredevil.

Become A Millionaire!

I have been gaming for over 30 years, and I haven't gotten rid of any games. I have boxes full of them in my closet, and most of them haven't been touched in decades. After seeing a mint copy of Super Mario 64 sell for $2 million in an auction, I decided to see what my collection was worth. If I never played any of my games and kept them in pristine condition, my 319 games would be worth roughly $675,000 in the condition they are now. I could probably sell it for $24,000. Why did I ever open the games! What was I thinking?!

Daniel Remelius
via email

You can't put a price on over three decades of adventuring. Much like comic books, video games are highly collectible. You may want to look into parting with some of the collection if you plan on keeping them in boxes forever, but then again, they could continue climbing in value or may hold priceless sentimental value. We still don't know why that copy of Mario 64 sold for so much, but if you have any copies of a game in mint condition from decades ago, do what you can to protect them!

The Matrix

The Matrix Resurrections looks incredible. That is easily my most anticipated movie on the horizon. Any chance we could get a game based on it?

Thomas Curry
via email

Enter the Matrix, The Path of Neo, and The Matrix Online all floundered, giving this franchise the toxicity of a poison pill for developers. Of all the movie franchises out there, it seems like a perfect fit for games – a sci-fi version of Max Payne. We doubt we'll get a game based on the upcoming film, but we wouldn't be surprised if another developer takes a shot at giving us an excellent Matrix game in the years to come.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

The Big Three

I have a PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X, and Switch. I know how fortunate I am to have all three. Do I need all of them? I think so. They all give me different experiences. I've realized that Xbox is about community, with most of Microsoft's games having multiplayer or co-op. PlayStation is about living out the ultimate solo adventure as most of Sony's games are designed for just one player. And Nintendo is about family, delivering games that anyone can play. Depending on how I'm feeling or who is over, there's good reason to have all three systems.

J. Lloyd
Park City, UT

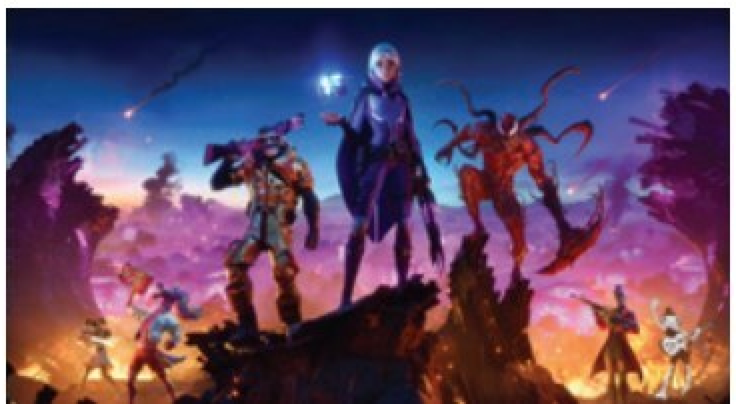
We love how you look at these companies' catalogues of games and mostly agree with the stance they have taken for the majority of titles. Nintendo's is the most clearly pronounced, creating games that can be enjoyed by everyone. That said, Microsoft and Sony also have wide selections of games that are for different age groups and audiences, but also know who is playing their games and strongly cater to them. Sony has a great thing going with its single-player adventures and Microsoft has a great multiplayer one-two punch with the Halo and Gears of War games.

Fortnite

I know that Fortnite is still one of the biggest games on the planet, and it probably doesn't need more praise heaped upon it, but I don't think it gets enough credit for the chances Epic takes with it. Live concerts, spur-of-the-moment events, shutting the game down completely to establish a plot point – no other developer does anything like this. Epic is constantly changing things up and surprising its player base. For this (and the great gameplay), I can't stop playing it. To use a term I saw on your website, this is one of my "forever games."

Nneka Bonner-Smith
Burbank, CA

The innovative content you referenced is one of the reasons why Fortnite continues to be a juggernaut that draws in players. We never really know what will happen next, but most of the changes or surprises turn heads and give this game a new charge. While Fortnite's characters are popular on their own, another critical aspect of Fortnite's recent success is Epic's partnerships. From *Aliens* to *Rick and Morty*, the roster of playable characters is a greatest hits of modern-day pop culture. It's always fun to see who will join next.



Game Of The Year?

In terms of significant game releases, has 2021 been a slower year than 2020? It feels like it has. Right now, I think Returnal is the runaway Game of the Year, and nothing else is close to it. All of the other games seem like they are old franchises coming back. Halo, Ratchet & Clank, Psychonauts, Call of Duty, Battlefield, Far Cry; the list goes on and on. Am I crazy, or is this year's Game of the Year list going to be a letdown?

Shelby Malcolm
via email

You aren't wrong in thinking Returnal is one of the year's best games, but there are plenty of other notable releases that hit this year, and many more are on the way. So far, we've been treated to incredible new experiences along the lines of Death's Door, Valheim, Splitgate, Deathloop, and The Forgotten City. And we shouldn't be shortchanging games like Halo Infinite, Metroid Dread, and Far Cry 6 just because these series have been around for decades. By our estimates, 2021's release slate has just as many notable releases as last year and should bring plenty of excitement when the holiday season arrives.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Help. My son wants a game called Tenchu, but I can't find it on new systems!"

That series hasn't returned in a long time. Try Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice. It's more fantastical but similar in setting and from the same developer.

"Next year, I'm getting married, and my husband wants our honeymoon to be the Star Wars: Galactic Starcruiser two-day adventure. How do I tell him 'No'?"

Show him the text above.

"Has Harrison Ford ever been in a video game?"

Yes. He reprised his role as Han Solo in Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens. He's pretty good in it, too!

"Name one character you would love to see added to Smash Bros."

The Tyrannosaurus rex that ate the guy off the toilet from *Jurassic Park*. That's the go-getter attitude that wins tournaments!

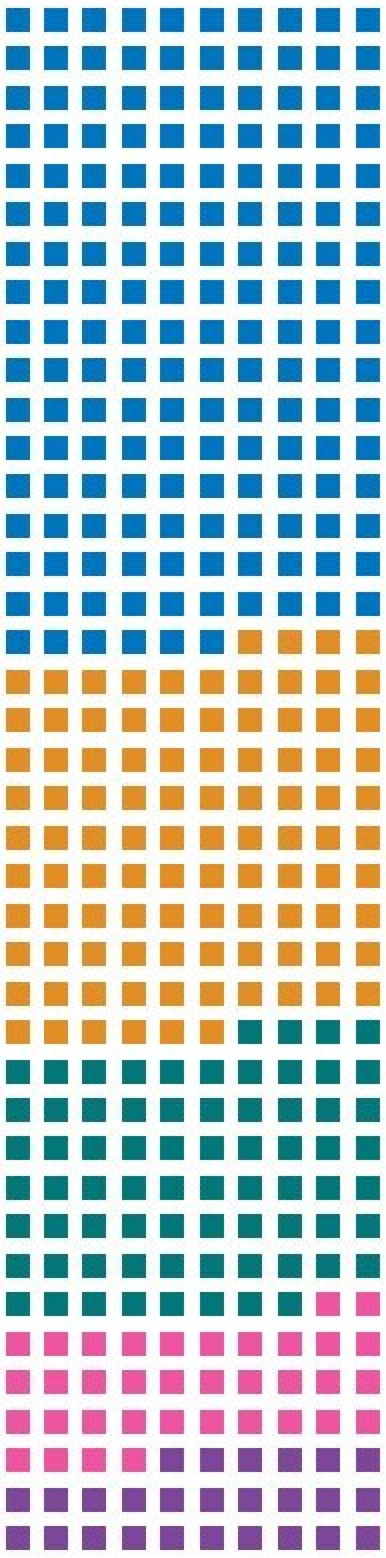
Best Comment:

"Y'all need to grow up and …" [You don't need to see the rest of the email]

Question Of The Month:

How many games do you purchase in a year?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Are still trying to get PlayStation 5
- 🟧 Love Xbox's Quick Resume feature
- 🟩 Desperately want more Zelda: Breath of the Wild 2 information
- 🟥 Have pointed opinions about game reviews
- 🟪 Are oddly angry about Fallout 76 right now

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Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers if they thought Steam Deck would be as successful in the handheld space as Switch. Here's how they responded …

I'm buying a Steam Deck for a couple of reasons: The first is that I am a long-time Xbox user. It's my console of choice, but I would be lying if I said that I wasn't at least a little bit jealous of PS exclusives. The Steam Deck will allow me the opportunity to play some PS exclusives on Steam without investing in a different ecosystem. The second reason is Xbox Game Pass. I can take my Xbox with me on the go and play it with a portable system that is far superior to my cell phone.

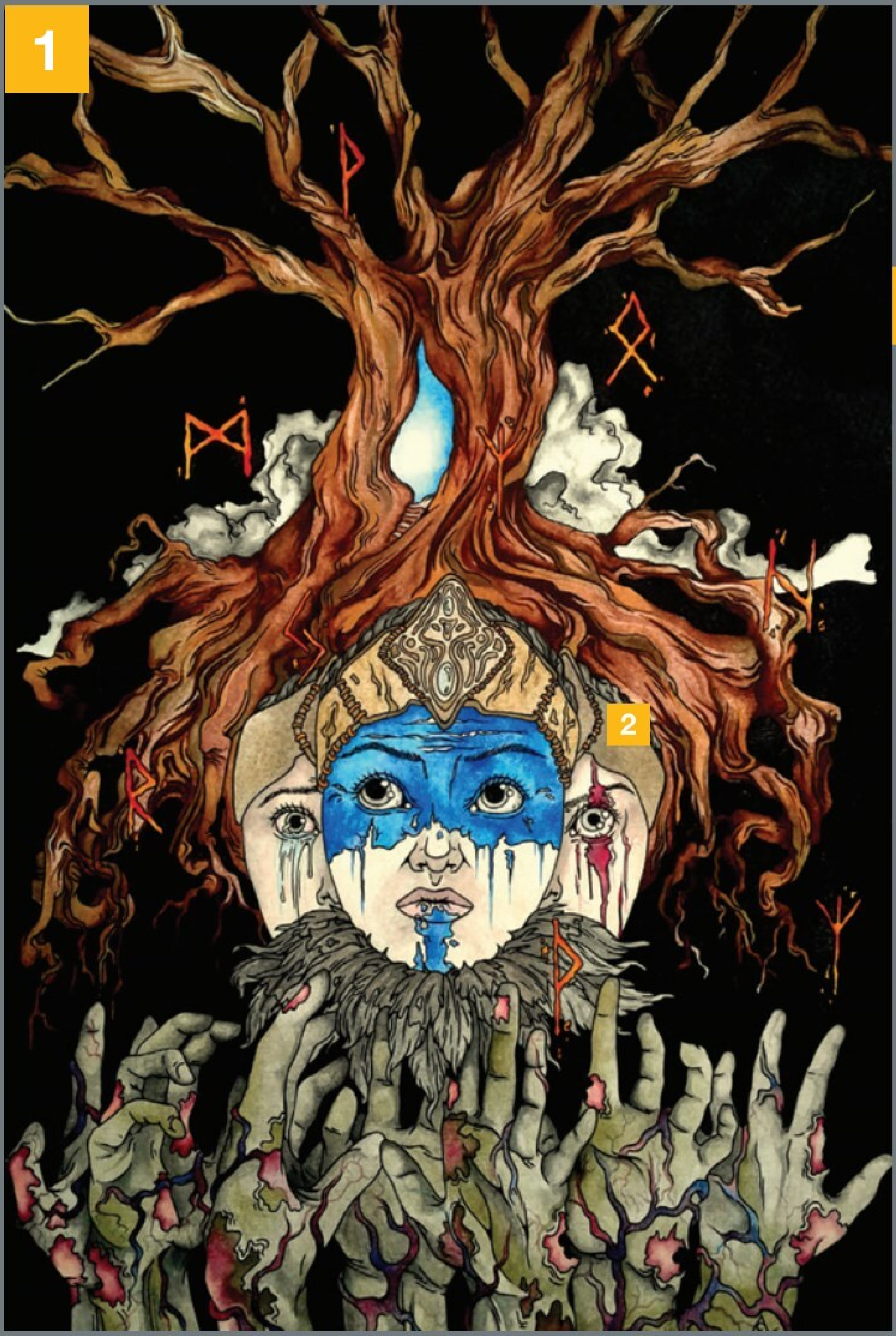
NuthinbutBitz
via email

Nintendo will always have Mario, but I think Steam Deck is a game-changer that will severely hurt Switch in the long run. The hardware has to be proven first, but being able to play almost every PC game on it (which includes the likes of Call of Duty) is what we always wanted from a handheld. That dream will soon be a reality.

Micah Hall
via email

I think Steam Deck will be a premium device that not many people have. With chip shortages and no actual retail footprint, I don't see how it can be as mainstream as Switch. Nintendo has nothing to worry about.

Jennifer Worthington
via email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WINNER

1 Amy Fairweather

They say many hands make light work, but there isn't anything light about this.

2 Julianne Fisbeck

Animal Crossing: New Horizons may have some spooky Halloween decorations, but nothing's scarier than facing your overgrown island after an extended absence.

3 Jackson Stanard

Suddenly, starting a premium daycare service didn't seem like such a great idea.

4 Nick Almeida

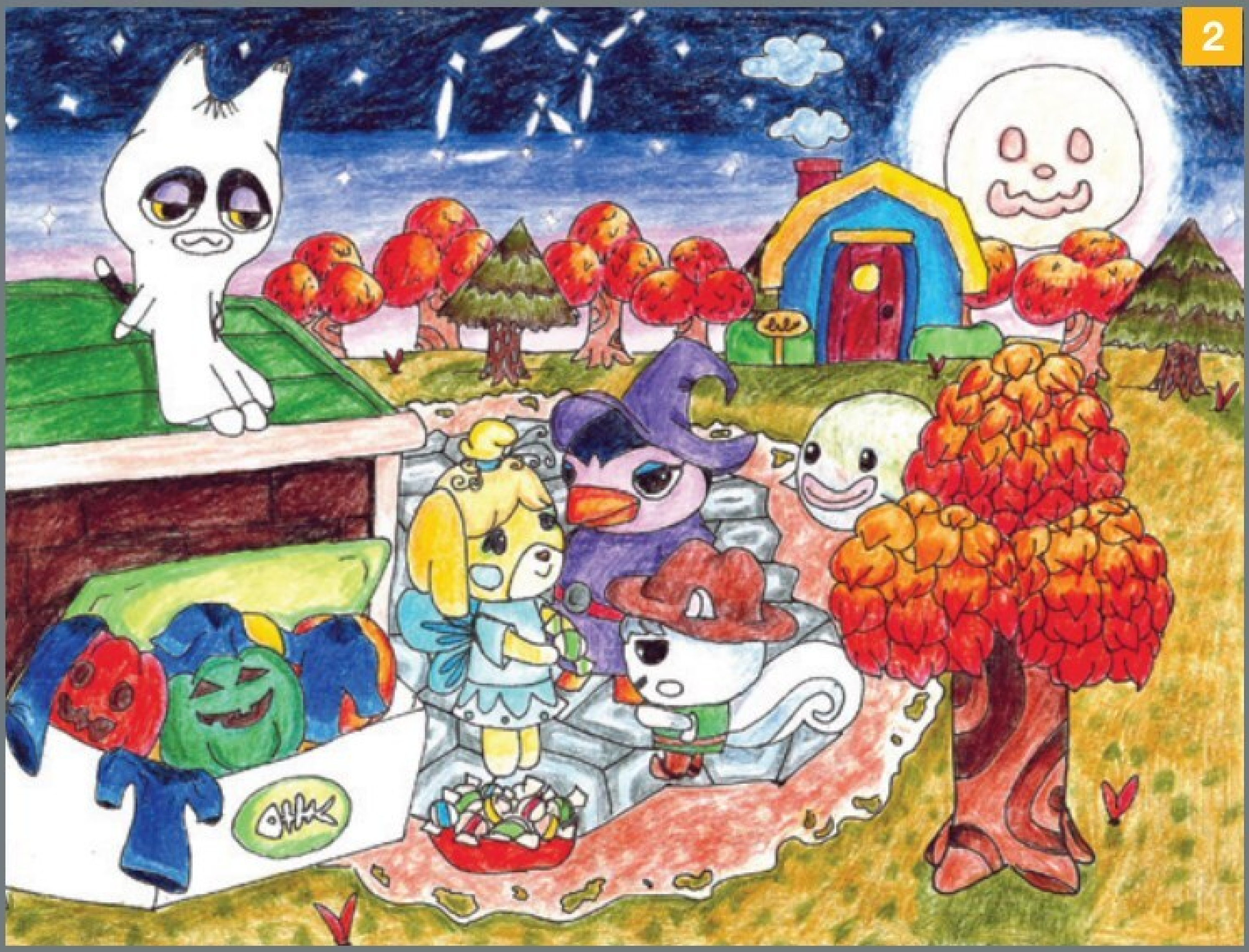
He's right behind me, isn't he?

5 Eric C. Jackson

While it looks like the stuff of nightmares, this tentacled creature only wants a big hug.

6 Amanda Adamczyk

Scarecrow is one terrifying villain; you might say he is outstanding in his field.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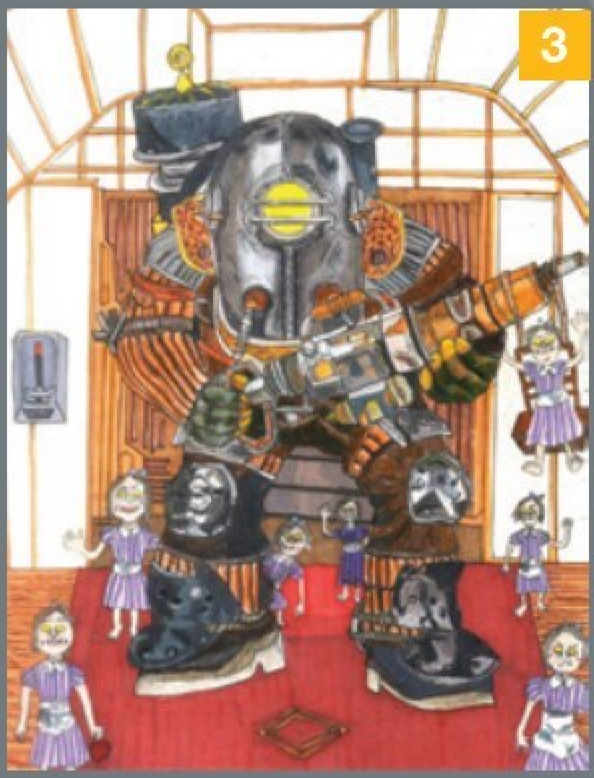
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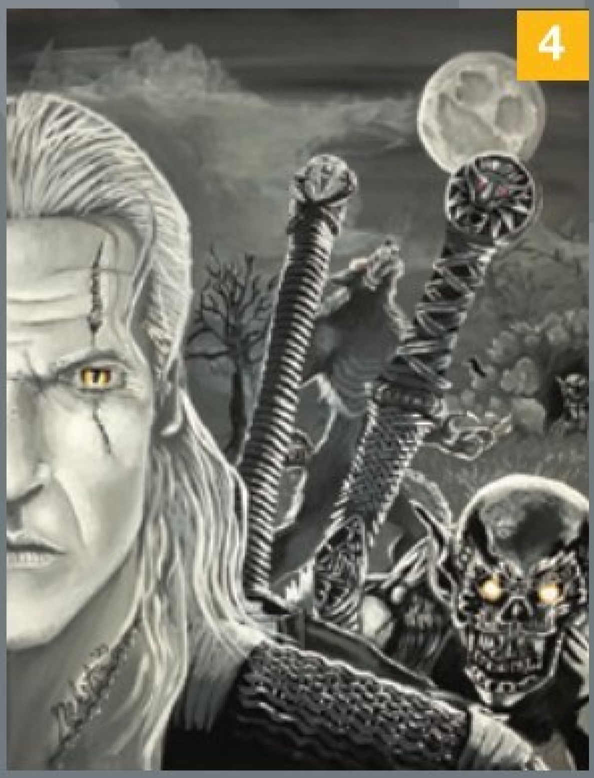
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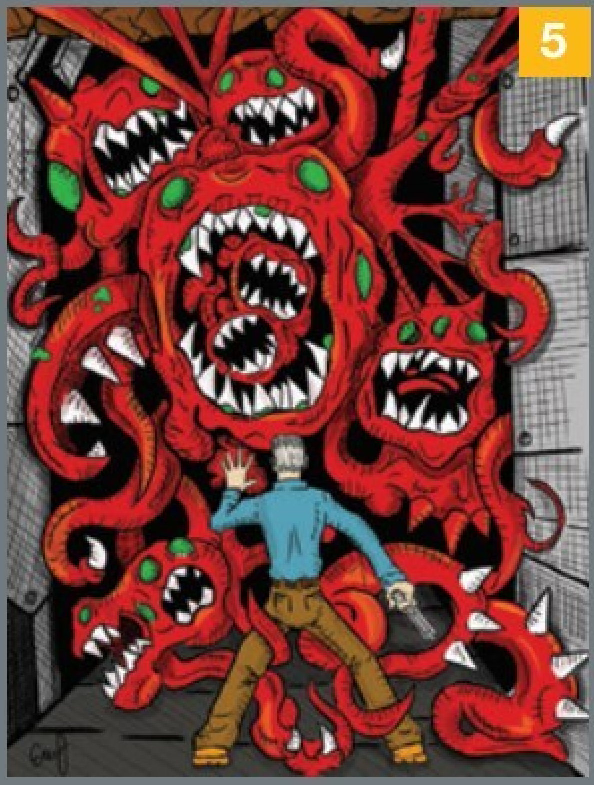
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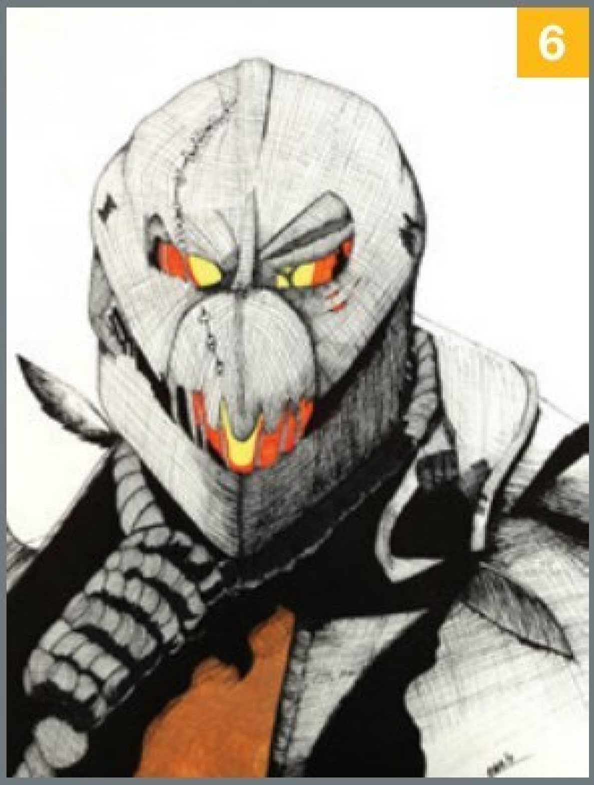
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A VISION OF PS5'S FUTURE

T

The PlayStation 5's first full year on the market has been a strong one. With system-seller games like Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart, Returnal, and Blue Point's Demon's Souls remake – alongside access to last-gen hits like God of War and Uncharted 4: A Thief's End with a PlayStation Plus subscription – Sony's new-gen platform is breaking sales records. According to Sony Interactive Entertainment's blog, it sold 10 million units by mid-July, making the PS5 the company's fastest-selling console ever.

With the industry now moving into 2022, Sony shared some of what it has in store during September's PlayStation Showcase. The show's timing is notable, as the company decided to forgo a more traditional summer event this year. Though it means missing out on all the excitement the show drums up, skipping E3 has several advantages. PlayStation's recent event captured viewers' undivided attention, pointing the sole spotlight on Sony's news. While the presentation lasted only 40 minutes, it highlighted an impressive array of the console's upcoming offerings and seemed to underscore where the team is going into next year.

by Jill Grodt

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC REMAKE

Sony came out of the gates swinging with its first announcement, officially revealing that Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic is getting the remake treatment. A game that originally came out in 2003 for Xbox, the remake will be a timed PS5 exclusive, definitely a feather in the console's cap. KotOR earned critical and commercial acclaim when it launched and told a story in the galaxy far, far away set thousands of years before the Skywalker Saga began. Your created character finds themselves trapped in the battles between the dark and light sides of the Force and, by the end, must make difficult decisions regarding their role in this fight.

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

Roll for initiative. Tiny Tina's Wonderlands got a brand new, first-look gameplay trailer, and it was overflowing with chaotic action. The Borderlands spinoff was first revealed during this year's E3 festivities and once again casts the fan-favorite titular character as a kind of video game D&D Dungeon Master. Fantasy tropes like dragons, spells, and unicorns collide with the series' over-the-top mayhem, and players can expect guns galore. Tiny Tina's Wonderlands won't be exclusive to the PlayStation 5 and will also come to Xbox consoles and PC on March 25. For more, see page 65.

PROJECT EVE

Showing off all the graphical prowess of the PlayStation 5, Project EVE's long-haired main character sliced her way through scores of horrifically detailed monsters. Developed by Korean-based Shift Up, the polished-looking action game will be coming to the PS5, but it's unclear if it's an exclusive title. The trailer didn't reveal much, and, guessing from its action-based content and limited story details, Project EVE won't be hitting the platform any time soon. Despite that, the futuristic, post-apocalyptic title will introduce even more variety to the console's anticipated lineup.

MARVEL'S WOLVERINE

One of the show's biggest surprises was when a trailer popped up with the Marvel and Insomniac logos, and it wasn't for the next Spider-Man title. Instead, Insomniac revealed it is working on a Wolverine game. In typical announcement trailer style, the clip was short and left us with a lot more questions than answers. With Sony's stated interest in its big, exclusive titles, we will undoubtedly see more of Marvel's Wolverine in future PlayStation streams.

FORSPOKEN

This isn't the first time we have seen Forspoken at a major show – we last got a glimpse of it at Square Enix Presents earlier this year – but the game was still mostly a mystery before the PlayStation Showcase. On top of revealing more of the game's story, which follows New York City native Frey Holland as she stumbles upon a magical realm, we also learned more about the talented team behind the title. This includes writing from Amy Hennig of Uncharted fame and music composed by Bear McCreary, who also worked on 2018's God of War. It seems Sony is happy to use talent from its other franchises to bolster its upcoming roster.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

The new-gen version of Rockstar Games' 2013 hit, Grand Theft Auto V, is coming soon, though not as soon as fans previously expected. Sony announced the enhanced game would come to its latest console at the PS5 reveal event last year. Though this shined-up version of GTA V is also coming to the Xbox family of consoles, Rockstar once again gave Sony the chance to show it off in a PlayStation event. Unfortunately, the biggest news from this showcase's trailer is that the game will run past its 2021 release window and is now coming out in March 2022.

ALAN WAKE REMASTERED

Out now, Alan Wake Remastered is another cross-gen, cross-platform title that gave Sony an exclusive trailer for the PlayStation Showcase – perhaps highlighting one advantage to setting the presentation closer to fall. Alan Wake Remastered is an enhanced version of the 2010 title, improving environments, textures, sounds effects, and more.

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

Like Marvel's Wolverine, Sony confirmed Marvel's Spider-Man 2 is coming exclusively to the company's new-gen console. This could signal that first-party studios may be turning away from cross-generational releases as we head into the new year. Insomniac, which has only been a Sony-owned studio for two years, has been busy making itself one of the company's leading development teams; Spider-Man: Miles Morales and Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart have been mega-hits in the console's first year. Spider-Man 2's trailer revealed the 2023 game would feature Peter Parker and Miles Morales squaring off against Venom.

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Ghostwire: Tokyo – now releasing spring 2022 – has been floating around the industry's consciousness since its 2019 Bethesda E3 conference reveal. Many wondered about the title's PlayStation-exclusive launch after Microsoft acquired Bethesda's parent company earlier this year, but the PlayStation Showcase was ready to lay any remaining doubts to rest. Like fellow Bethesda-published game Deathloop, Ghostwire: Tokyo will eventually come to Xbox consoles after its exclusivity period is up.

MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

On October 26, fans will get to play through the adventures of Star-Lord and his ragtag, mercenary crew in Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy. Sony's presentation featured a brand-new story trailer, showing off the game's antagonistic organization, The Universal Church of Truth, chasing universal domination. We also saw Mantis, the Nova Corps, the canine cosmonaut Cosmo, and Peter Quill's transforming blasters. These elemental weapons, linked to the hero's DNA, will help him fight enemies and find his way through the galaxy – as soon as he figures out how to use them. We got our hands on Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy; you can learn more on page 63.

GOD OF WAR RAGNAROK

Finishing out the show was a trailer for Santa Monica Studio's hotly-anticipated sequel, God of War Ragnarok. In the gorgeous opening sequence, Kratos takes shelter in a cave by the fire while his son, Atreus, returns with a freshly killed stag. Fans of the series may recognize this moment's significance, as the original game's E3 trailer showed the aging Kratos teaching his hesitant young son to hunt his first deer. Now, it seems Atreus is a seasoned professional, proving he is growing more self-reliant and experienced within the first few seconds of the video. From here, the trailer reveals a wide range of environments, the ongoing conflict between our heroes and the Norse gods, and some early narrative beats.

To learn a little bit more, *Game Informer* spoke with God of War Ragnarok's director, Eric Williams, and creative director Cory Barlog. Williams has worked with the studio since 2004 and has had a hand in every God of War title, which made it easier for Barlog, director of 2018's God of War, to turn over the reins. Pouring his unique perspective into the title, Williams told our team that he wanted to move the narrative away from a son learning from his father. Introducing the youthful giant Angrboda was, in part, a way to pivot from dialogue with "a lot of telling" to something better suited to Atreus' growing confidence.

Williams also discussed some of his talks with the combat team to figure out what they "hold onto" and "let go of" in Ragnarok. While he wasn't ready to spill details about the changes yet, the director did share, "there are a lot more choices in there to let you have your own Kratos and Atreus kind of set up." Whether you're the type to rush at your enemies or hang back, it seems there will be options that speak to you. However, don't expect revolutionary changes. Rather than completely altering the game now that he is at the helm, Williams says Ragnarok is "not like a massive, giant leap" away from its predecessor but rather a "refinement." He wants 2018's God of War and Ragnarok "to sit next to each other as siblings." Hopefully, the games won't look to the Greek and Norse pantheons for their relationship role models. ◆

SENT OVERSEAS

The wild and misunderstood story of video game localization

by Kimberley Wallace

How does a video game from another region make it into your hands, and how do companies ensure you're getting an experience that lives up to the original? As the gaming industry becomes more globalized, video game localization is an increasingly pertinent topic. But few people actually understand what goes into the process. Preparing to release a game in a new country or region comes with many challenges that go well beyond simple translation.

When a game is localized well, it's free of typos and grammatical errors, the dialogue is natural, and the instructions make sense. But even this is skimming the surface of the localization team's role in the process. As games become more complex and text-heavy, not only do the challenges continue to grow, but the quality bar – and our expectations – constantly rise. There's now a larger focus on the ways games are adapted from their origin for our consumption. And rightfully so, as poor localization can tarnish our experience with a game. Or it can live on in jokes and memes, like Zero Wing's "All your base are belong to us!" or Final Fantasy IV's "You spoony bard!"

These days, we don't see as many hilarious blunders, despite receiving games that are much more complex and challenging to bring to a Western audience, such as the Yakuza series, where Japanese culture is integral

Yakuza 3 Remastered

to its identity. We chatted with nine different people in localization, who have worked on series such as Ace Attorney, Nier, and SMT, to discover more about the process and its hardships, uncovering everything from why direct translations fail to adapting language-specific puzzles.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Every language has its own complexities, rules, and flavors. What's acceptable and understandable in communication differs depending on the region. For instance, the Japanese language uses a lot of hierarchical signifiers to show respect, but this sounds awkward when translated into English. When accepting a task from a superior, English speakers don't say things like, "I humbly accept."

Japanese also doesn't require the same kind of explicit context that English does; sentences often don't have a subject, object, or other information necessary in English. "It's because Japanese is a high context culture, whereas English is a low context culture," explains Sega Lost Judgment producer Scott Strichart. "Japanese expects you to understand the implication of a sentence. There's a lot of other stuff under the hood in Japanese culture; you just naturally can appreciate when someone says something. They don't speak directly about people often. There's no subject, so to speak."

And then there's the issue of how different cultures view certain terms. "A word's dictionary definition and its actual usage and the image it conjures up for a native speaker can be very different at times," says Capcom localization director Janet Hsu. "An example is the English word 'animation' being shortened to anime in Japanese, and then getting re-imported into English as 'anime.' The Japanese word [means] 'any kind of animation,' including cartoons, but in English, the word "anime" is strictly reserved for Japanese animated works. Now, imagine trying to directly translate whole concepts and trains of logic from one language into another, and you can see how things can quickly go off the rails."

イセザキロード
ISEZAKI ROAD
ナギビル
ゴールデンイエロー
パチンコ

Yakuza: Like a Dragon

It's important to look at how languages differ because little things have huge consequences in the process. The hottest debates surrounding localization today center on translation and how faithful it is to the source. Fans worry about not getting an authentic experience or localization teams taking too many liberties. This is where most misconceptions originate, and localizers have heard it all, from people assuming Google Translate can do the job to cries of censorship over alterations made for Western sensibilities. However, the biggest request from gamers is often for a "direct translation."

> **"Literal translation does not exist because translating is a creative venture."**

THE PROBLEM WITH DIRECT TRANSLATIONS

Many in localization will tell you direct translation is not their job. "Literal translation does not exist because translating is a creative venture," says freelance localization editor Derek Heemsbergen, who worked on Dragalia Lost and Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin. "When people talk about direct translation, what they mean is literal translation in as much as translation can be literal. They want Japanese grammar and idioms preserved as one-to-one as possible, and that makes for really clumsy text and writing."

Direct translations can actually harm the message and change the intent. Jessica Chavez, a freelance localization writer, who was previously on staff at Xseed Games and most recently worked on Mistwalker's Fantasian mobile game, affirms that not everything translates. "There's a really famous example of Kentucky Fried Chicken back in the '80s when they decided to release their product in China," she says. "They really wanted to keep their slogan; it's something that's really iconic. Everybody knows it's 'finger lickin' good,' right? So they directly translated it. And in Chinese, it came to, 'eat your fingers off.'"

This example demonstrates the importance of a localization team, but many confuse what localization actually is. According to John Ricciardi, founder of 8-4, the goal is maintaining the intent and feeling. "We try to preserve the experience so that people, when they're playing it in English or vice versa, are basically getting the same feelings and having similar reactions. And I feel like if we've done that, then we've done our job. It's not about having one-to-one word [translations], because there is no one-to-one word. That's the great myth. People think that with translation, you can just put it into a machine, and it comes out the other side. It doesn't work that way."

Chavez shares a similar sentiment. "My personal philosophy is intent and meaning over a literal translation," she says. "The whole goal for teams when they're making these games and they're releasing it in another country is they want to deliver the experience; they want players to laugh at the parts that they wrote that were funny. They want players to feel what their original audience felt. I think it's our job to communicate that, and a literal translation is going to lose that."

Chavez illustrates how things get altered during localization, referencing cultural traditions regarding how babies are delivered. In Japan, Momotaro is a popular folktale hero who was born form a giant peach. This story is used to say babies come from floating peaches, but a good equivalent from American culture is storks delivering babies. "So we're delivering the same intention, this folktale way of how babies are delivered, but we're making it make sense for a Western audience. If you directly translate that, you're going to lose what the dev team is trying to convey."

Of course, it helps that people are more aware of Japanese culture and common phrases nowadays, but it's still a tricky line to walk to ensure an English player understands the meaning. The Yakuza series and its Judgment spin-offs have the extra challenge of making Japan integral to the story. "It's a balance between authenticity, accuracy, and clarity," Strichart says. "I think someone who goes in to play Yakuza, we have to expect that what that player wants to get is a somewhat foreign experience; they want a game about Japanese people to feel like it's about Japanese people."

Strichart says the team is careful not to over-localize, but does question things like whether Americans will know what Tonkotsu ramen is or if it needs to be changed to pork broth ramen. A lot of times to solve this issue, additional text can explain a term. Or, if a close English equivalent exists, the team will use that for better comprehension. Strichart says when something is changed, it's in order to ensure the player can understand the content; the team strives to avoid over-explaining things. "We make sure that we never forget that [these games are] set in Japan," he says. "And that it feels like it is Japanese, despite being in English."

GETTING CREATIVE

Localizers use their skills in a wide variety of ways, as it's their job to solve for anything that could be problematic. This can range from thinking of different ways to get a character's personality across to making a puzzle or riddle work in a language it wasn't designed for. Every game is different and has different obstacles to solve.

Strichart has spent the last seven years working on the Yakuza series, and anyone who has played the games knows they're rife with minigames, but some minigames just don't work if you try to translate them directly. "There are chat minigames where you have to form words together or give responses to sentences that if you didn't translate them correctly, the wrong answer is too obvious or the right answer isn't obvious enough. Sometimes these minigames have to go through a lot more localization than we would just taking words from the page."

And sometimes, you just have to admit defeat. Strichart points to Mahjong, a commonly played tile-based game in Asia. "There's nothing more fun and kind of humorous than the [Western] Yakuza audience interacting with Mahjong, who are just like, 'I don't touch it.' Or people who are trying to get into it and trying to understand it and still can't. We can only bridge that gap so much. Over the years, we've added little numbers to indicate what the tiles are. We've added increasingly complex and massive tutorials to the game where we're trying to make it as accessible as possible. And yet, it still remains just this wall."

Puzzles can be the hardest to convey in another language, especially when they use clever mechanics. "Because the entire gameplay of an Ace Attorney game resides in the strength of the logic in the writing, the localization itself is the gameplay, and how detail-oriented you are as a localizer will show in how playable the final product is as a game," Hsu says. "Sure, there are some leaps in logic that the original Japanese may force the player to make. However, if the lines are translated poorly, or if the foreshadowing is not set up properly, someone playing the English version will have a much tougher time than the original Japanese version intended, and that would negatively impact the player experience."

Hsu says some of her favorite moments from localizing the series have been finding word puzzle solutions, like Spirit of Justice's karuta cards trick. In the English version, the cards spell out WHET NO 4, but have a different message once you sleuth it out. "Nothing feels better than when you know you've finally found a truly great localization solution that will hopefully provide players with that same sense of 'aha!' when they solve it in English that a Japanese player had with the original version."

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trilogy

Chavez can attest that figuring out puzzles is one of the most rewarding parts of the job. She recalls a recent achievement from an unannounced project. "I had to translate an 11th-century poem, and I had to edit that into a code puzzle that had to be input," she says. "So in the Japanese [version], they just had like, 'ka ki ke ko ku,' so they could have kind of a chanting style for it. But I had to work it from this English translation of this 11th-century poem that I boiled down into five lines, and I had to turn it into a computer code. And it still makes sense! The solution to when you get to the end of it also changes and ever so slightly, and also makes sense. I was like, 'I nailed this one!' Changing a super ancient poem into a computer code was fun."

Bringing characters to life in another language can also be tricky and often requires creativity and subtlety to convey their personalities and make them relatable to a North American audience. Sega/Atlus lead editor Josh Malone fondly looks back on Judgment, his first full-fledged project as an editor, and finding the right way to represent the foreigner-in-Japan character, Ryan Acosta.

"If I had gone with a one-to-one translation, Ryan would have used some corrupted form of Elizabethan English and the result would have been more like an SMT angel than a fervent otaku," he recalls. "Instead, I had to pull a Kagutsuchi and scan his heart – what were his conversational cues trying to tell me? At that point, I started thinking, 'Okay, this dude's definitely a weeb, that's what the writers were going for,' so I took that idea and ran with it. Thankfully, his character ended up being quite well-received, so I'm glad I went out on a limb and added a bit of personal experience to his dialogue."

For Trails of Cold Steel, the team struggled with ways to capture elder Roselia's personality. At first, NIS America was planning on giving her have an old-timey English accent, but when the team heard it read out loud, it just didn't feel right. NIS localizers worked to find a good way to capture the different parts of her personality, from when she's acting more high and mystical to when she's just being an annoyed grandma. "The sort of middle ground between those two that we reached was we limit her use of contractions for the more casual scenes, and when she's being more fancy, she'll speak without them," says NIS America lead editor Eric Budensiek.

Something not often discussed is the challenges of character counts for localizers. Text has to fit within a certain amount of space per the game's programming, frequently seen as text boxes. While sometimes programmers can make these bigger and add extra text boxes to accommodate the English language, it's a rare luxury. "Japanese is a dense language; orthographically, there's more information in a smaller number of [characters]," Heemsbergen explains. "So there could be a compound that's five kanji, so only five characters displaying on the screen, but the meaning in English is something like, 'super incredible, enchanted potion of ultimate revival,' which is much longer."

What makes this even more complicated is Japanese scripts are already very dense and use up the majority of space, so it's up to localization to rewrite, trim, and condense the text in a way that gets all the information across and fits into a smaller amount of space. And they have to do it all on tight deadlines.

Trails of Cold Steel 3

UNDER PRESSURE

Thousands of lines in games need to be adapted, and deadlines and costs often factor into the equation. Localizers constantly need to weigh what battles to fight and make choices in a timely manner. "The framework that localizers have to work with are really quite constrained," Chavez explains. "We don't get a lot of time on these things. So when you're under a hard deadline, you have to choose between eloquence, or 'does it make sense?'"

The job also requires doing research and sometimes going back and forth with the original team for clarity and understanding. The amount of collaboration depends on the developer, but it seems like overall interaction is increasing, thanks to evolving tech providing easier and faster ways to communicate. Some interviewees explained their localization software has collaboration tools baked in, whereas others said they keep an open dialogue with message boards. "There's a misconception that the developer throws text over, we do it, they implement it, and no one reads it," Strichart says. "There's this constant back and forth, and it's a very collaborative process now. It has to be, like you can't throw text and renders and expect us to get it. Localization teams need context; that's 100 percent of our job."

Despite the time taken to preserve intent, the turnarounds can be brutal, and last-minute decisions – even those that seem small – can throw an entire

Lost Judgment

> **Localizers are asked to be many things: creative, problem solvers, and masters of language, to name a few.”**

project into chaos. Chavez learned this first hand when working on Half-Minute Hero for Xseed. After the game's localization was complete, the development team changed the font set to something easier to read. But altering the font style affected the character limits, meaning the team had to redo its work and come up with even shorter text. The kicker? They had one week to do it. “I had to go through every single line in the game and either fix them or rewrite the ones that went over,” she recalls. “Luckily, it was a smaller game, and it was a completely wacky game. So it sort of worked out in the end, but there was definitely a moment where I wondered, ‘What am I doing?’”

Deadlines are part of the job, but some are more taxing than others. Lost Judgment had a very aggressive timeline, something Strichart doesn't mince words about. “Lost Judgment was the ultimate pinnacle of challenge, just turning around that game in essentially a year with the amount of audio and languages that we had to do,” he says. “It takes its toll. Under the weight of that, you're looking at it almost like, ‘Okay, next time, we need to not do it this way, but for this time, let's just get it done.’”

Strichart said starting the localization process as early as they did was difficult because half the game wasn't built yet. “For a team that was mostly used to being able to just turn on the game and see how the characters interacted, you had to go ask the developers things like, ‘How close are these two standing?’ ‘Should they be yelling?’ That was a huge learning curve for us.”

Certain games also require more research than others, and the only way to truly convey the material is to know it intimately and thoroughly. “I've learned the subtle flavors of whisky, the intricacies of pachislot machines, and the worst things to say to your bartender – all for the sake of crafting realistic dialogue that leaves a deep (or deeply silly) impression,” Malone says about his time working on the SMT and Persona brands alongside Yakuza and Judgment.

Chavez had to take extra care when she worked on Mario & Sonic at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games because it involved a lot of trivia. “I had to do a lot of research looking at, ‘What's the actual world record for this?’ or ‘What's the name of this specific area in the Amazon?’ So it took a lot of checking back and forth.” She also recalls how on Fantasian, the editor “had a heck of a time” reading very technical scientific journals to try and understand the Higgs Boson, a subatomic particle that gives other particles their mass.

A localizer's work is far from easy, and it doesn't help that people trying to break into the field can often be exploited. Beyond localization members not always getting their due in game credits [see sidebar], the demands can reach concerning levels. “I've heard stories of freelancers working for other companies, and they're being asked to do like 10,000 characters [a day], which is insane,” Ricciardi says. “Our standard for translators is like 4,000 at most, and that's from what I've learned over the years is comfortable in one day for a typical Japanese-to-English translator.” Ricciardi said he's also heard of people getting paid as low as two cents a character. Just like other areas of the game industry, localization has its share of problems that need better solutions.

FOR THE LOVE OF LANGUAGE AND GAMES

A lot of blood, sweat, and tears go into adapting video games into other languages, and much of it we never see. Localizers are asked to be many things: creative, problem solvers, and masters of language, to name a few. The people who do it have an enormous task on their hands, and they don't take it lightly. “I've been in the business since I was like 19, and for me, games are everything,” Ricciardi says. “I love games. I appreciate games. I respect game creators. I want as much as possible when we're working on this stuff to be able preserve the integrity of what was intended with the game.”

Hsu sums up localization wonderfully. “I like to think of localizers as bridge builders – people who help to bring entertainment from a different culture to their audience by building the smoothest bridges they can, so that as much of the experience remains intact as possible, and doesn't get bent out of shape during transit,” she says. “Sometimes, you can reuse words from the original language to help build your bridges, and sometimes, you might need some additional context mortar to fill in the gaps and hold it all together. Other times, you might just find that a narrow stone bridge is unsuitable for the cart, and you need to expand it horizontally with more explanations or pave it over with cement by rewriting a segment for clarity. Each sentence is a unique bridge with a role to play over the course of the journey from the start of the game to the end.” ◆

Fighting For Credit

Localization comes with its battles, but localizers getting recognice for their work shouldn't be one of them. However, not all companies will list individual names in the end credits. Worse yet, many require NDAs that don't allow localizers to even say they worked on a project or list it on their resumes. This hurts a lot of people just entering the field from being able to advance. “It's really weird gatekeeping that needs to go away,” says 8-4 founder John Ricciardi. “Everybody should be credited on something that they've worked on in any industry on anything. I've credited people who did like an hour of work on a game that we worked on. There are some cases where technical limitations might prevent you from being able to put [a certain amount of people in the credits], and you can only put your company name. That happens, but as long as you have the opportunity, do it.”

CREATING WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

How Splitgate grew from a wild idea to a surprise comeback *by Marcus Stewart*

Splitgate is the peanut butter and chocolate of multiplayer arena shooters. The game takes Halo-inspired combat and blends it with Portal-style, well, portals to create a winning combination that regularly makes you ask, "Why didn't anyone do this sooner?" For some, it feels like Splitgate came out of nowhere. In reality, it's been around since 2019, when it launched in open beta on PC. While it enjoyed success back then, business picked up when a new beta began on consoles this July. Its player count is now in the millions, and its momentum doesn't appear to be slowing anytime soon. But how did Splitgate go from a wacky idea to a surprise hit?

It all starts with 1047 Games co-founder and CEO Ian Proulx, whose love for video games began with the Nintendo 64 and titles like GoldenEye 007, Zelda, and Super Smash Bros. His passion took off the following generation with the launch of the Xbox, the advent of modern online gaming, and, naturally, Halo. Proulx cites Halo 2 and 3 specifically as his favorite games growing up, saying, "The influence they had on me as a kid is undeniable."

Proulx attended Stanford University, where he studied computer science, earning both bachelor's and master's degrees. Proulx says he always considered entering the game industry and tinkered with the Unity Engine to get his feet wet in game development. As a Portal fan, he always wondered if that series'siganture mechanic would work in a competitive shooter. Proulx put the idea to the test with his senior college project, developing the prototype for what would eventually become Splitgate. His friend, dormmate, and eventual 1047 co-founder and CTO Nicholas Bagamian took an interest in the idea and teamed up with Proulx to help make the game a reality.

This prototype was initially called Portal Wars, though replicating Portal's signature mechanic wasn't easy. The feature needed to be recreated from scratch since the two projects ran on different engines. Proulx and Bagamian also had to ensure the portals behaved the way Portal fans expected while also considering their application in a shooter as opposed to a puzzle game. For example, bullets shot through portals need to hit their exact targets on the other side. After getting the portals working, the next step was designing maps that made sense for the game's unique combat and traversal. Once Portal Wars became playable, they tested the multiplayer component on friends. It was a big hit. "Even in its early state, it clearly had potential, was addictingly fun, and played fundamentally different than any shooter I had ever played," Proulx says.

Proulx and Bagamian knew they had something special and decided to bet on themselves by forming 1047 Games, named after their dorm room number. Growing pains ensued as the small team juggled tasks like marketing and PR on their own before hiring a remote staff. Securing funding also became a regular battle. Once the pieces fell into place, the team launched a successful beta on Steam in 2019, where Splitgate first began making some noise. The launch also allowed 1047 to fine-tune mechanics in a live environment. Those two years of playtesting paid off. The second open beta on consoles has been so well received that Splitgate's servers buckled under the weight of the millions of players enjoying it. A happy problem to have for sure, and despite the success, the team says its attitude remains humble, as has their focus on delivering the best game possible.

Splitgate will remain in open beta indefinitely as 1047 continues to tighten the bolts while delivering content updates (such as launching Season 0 during Gamescom this past August) along the way. Expanding the game's lore, hosting in-game events, and adding a map editor are just some of 1047's goals. The studio also believes Splitgate has esports potential. As Splitgate continues to attract an audience, 1047 recently secured another $100 million in funding, which joins a previous $20 million it received just months prior. What started a wild idea between two college seniors has become one of the year's biggest success stories, and Splitgate's future continues to look bright. ◆

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24

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Holiday Buying Guide

2021

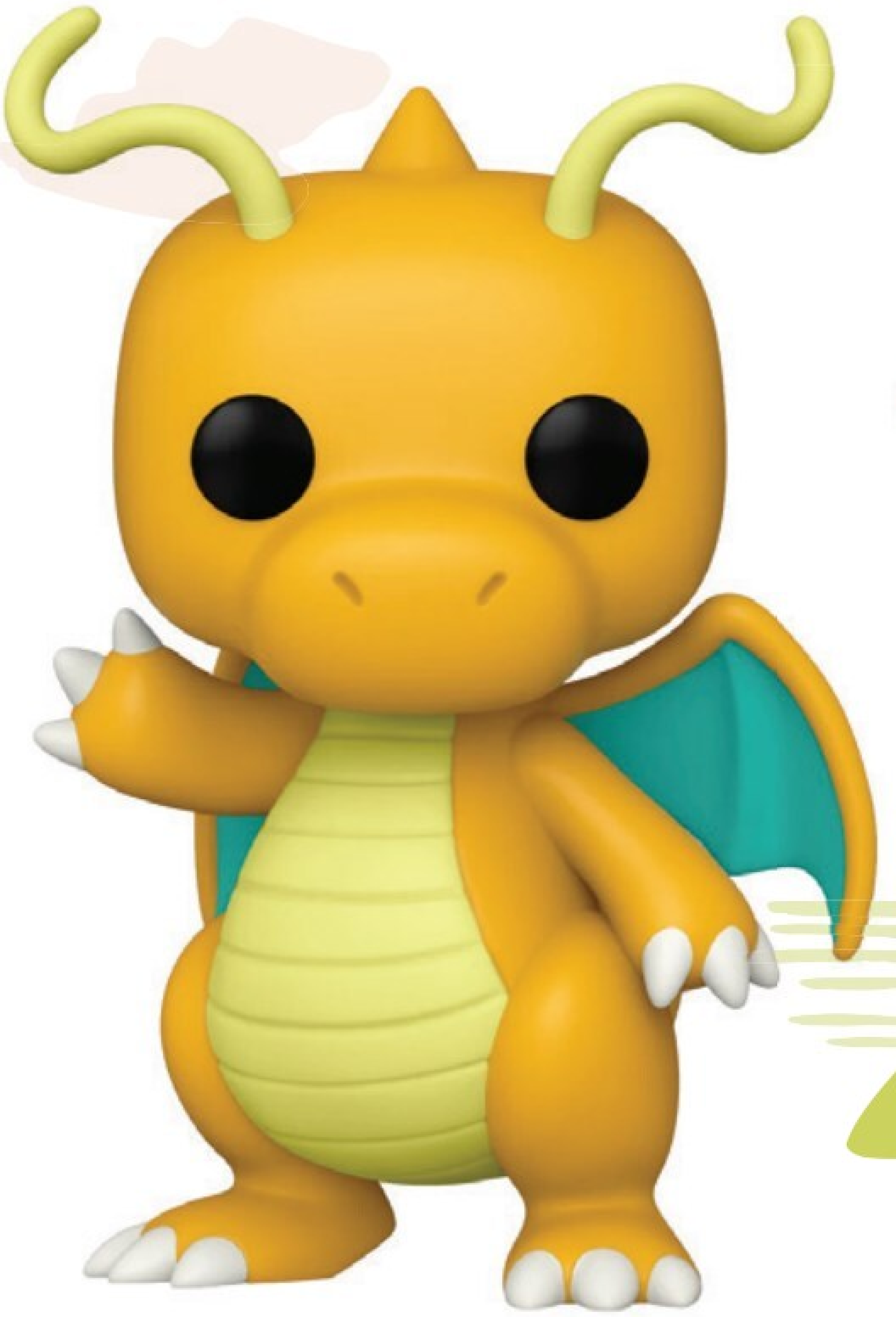
The season is fast approaching when you may be hunting down the best gifts for family and friends. Or perhaps you're just looking for a way to reward yourself at the end of the year? Either way, we've gathered a curated selection of awesome collectibles, tech, gaming gear, and more, handpicked by our team on the merits of quality, fun, and useability. No matter what you enjoy, or how much you want to spend, we've got something for your budget and interests. Happy holidays!

by Matt Miller

Toys + Collectibles

1

Fun with kids



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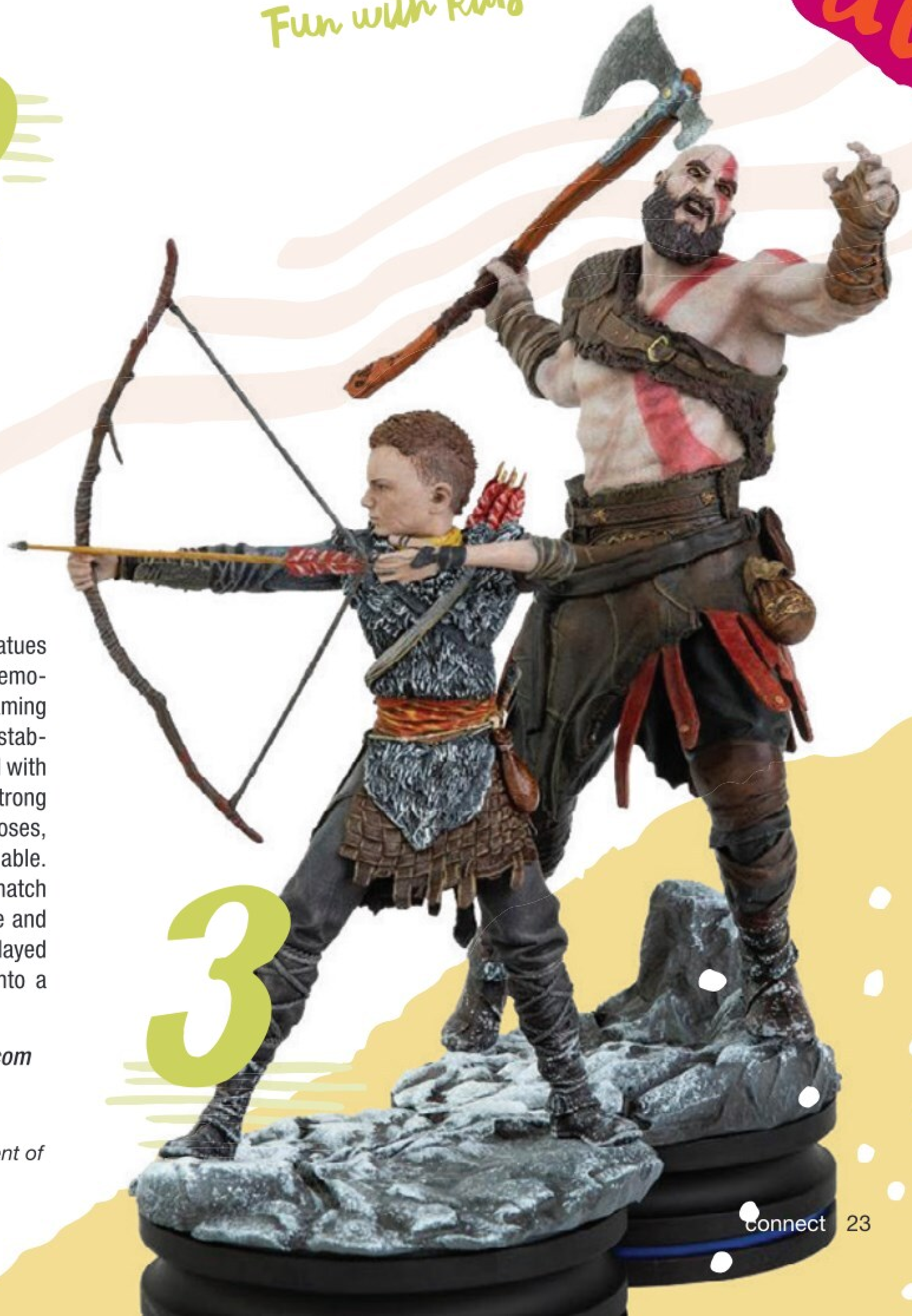

3

❶ Mario Kart Slot Car Racing

High-speed racing awaits on this two-kart track where Mario and Luigi can reach scale speeds of 370-mph along the nearly 10 foot-long course. The battery-powered set includes a two-piece removable jump ramp for some added thrills, and the full set is expandable with the rest of the Carrera GO!!! line of slot cars, so you can design your own courses through the Mushroom Kingdom.

$39.99 | *carrera-toys.com*

❷ Funko Pop! Dragonite Pokémon

$11 | *funko.com*

❸ Kratos and Atreus Statues

Matching father and son statues bring life to one of the most memorable relationships in recent gaming history. Modern Icons has established an excellent track record with its statues line, showcasing strong detail work and evocative poses, while keeping pricing affordable. These 1/9th scale figures match the intensity of the 2018 game and look handsome whether displayed alone or linking their bases into a connected display.

$59.99 (apiece) | *gamestop.com*

Disclaimer: *Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop.*

Toys + Collectibles

❹ The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild Zelda and Link

Packaged together as a set, these two ten-inch PVC statues beautifully capture the heroes of Hyrule. Link comes with Traveler's Bow drawn, while Zelda stands resolute with Sheikah Slate in-hand, both accentuated by some especially striking paint details. Each statue features LED light-up effects, ready to stand sentinel over either side of your TV as you patiently await the lauded game's sequel.

$189 | *first4figures.com*

❺ Destiny 2 Fallen Baby Plush

Sure, we've had some big revelations from the Destiny storyline of late. But no revelation was as big as how adorable baby Fallen aliens turned out to be. This 10-inch plush ably captures the swaddled cuteness of these soon-to-be deadly aliens, four eyes and all. Perfect for cuddling on your next raid night.

$30 | *numskull.com*

❻ Masters of the Universe Revelation BattleCat

The Masters of the Universe are back in a big way, including an eye-catching new line of articulated action figures modeled after the character designs from the new Netflix show. While He-Man and Skeletor are all well and good, the indisputable showpiece of the new line is this 13-inch-long BattleCat. Bedecked in armor, the mask can be removed to show the bashful Cringer underneath.

$39 | *shop.mattel.com*

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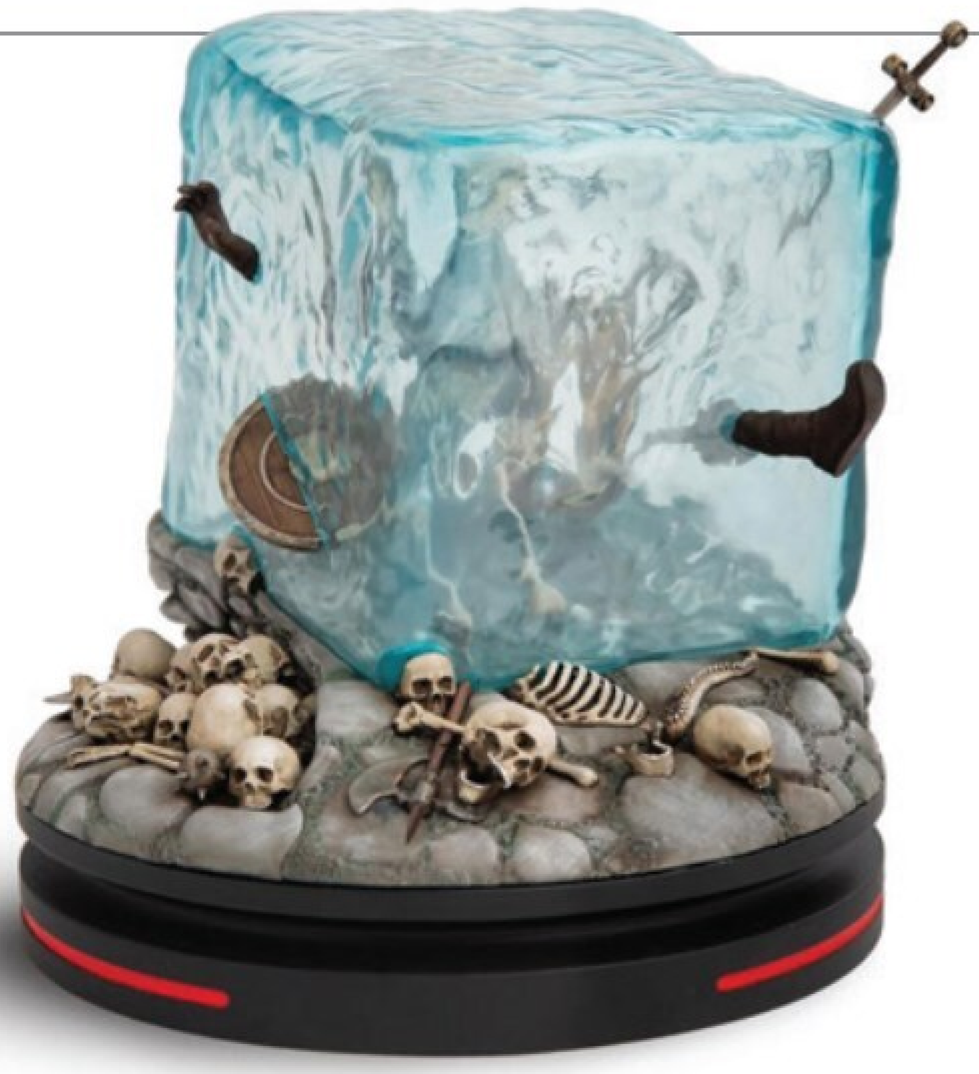
Transformers Optimus Prime Replica Helmet

Inspired by the Generation 1 version of Optimus Prime as see in the *Transformers* '80s cartoon, this GameStop exclusive, with unique design, is a fully wearable helmet with light-up eyes and authentic sounds and phrases. **$109.99**

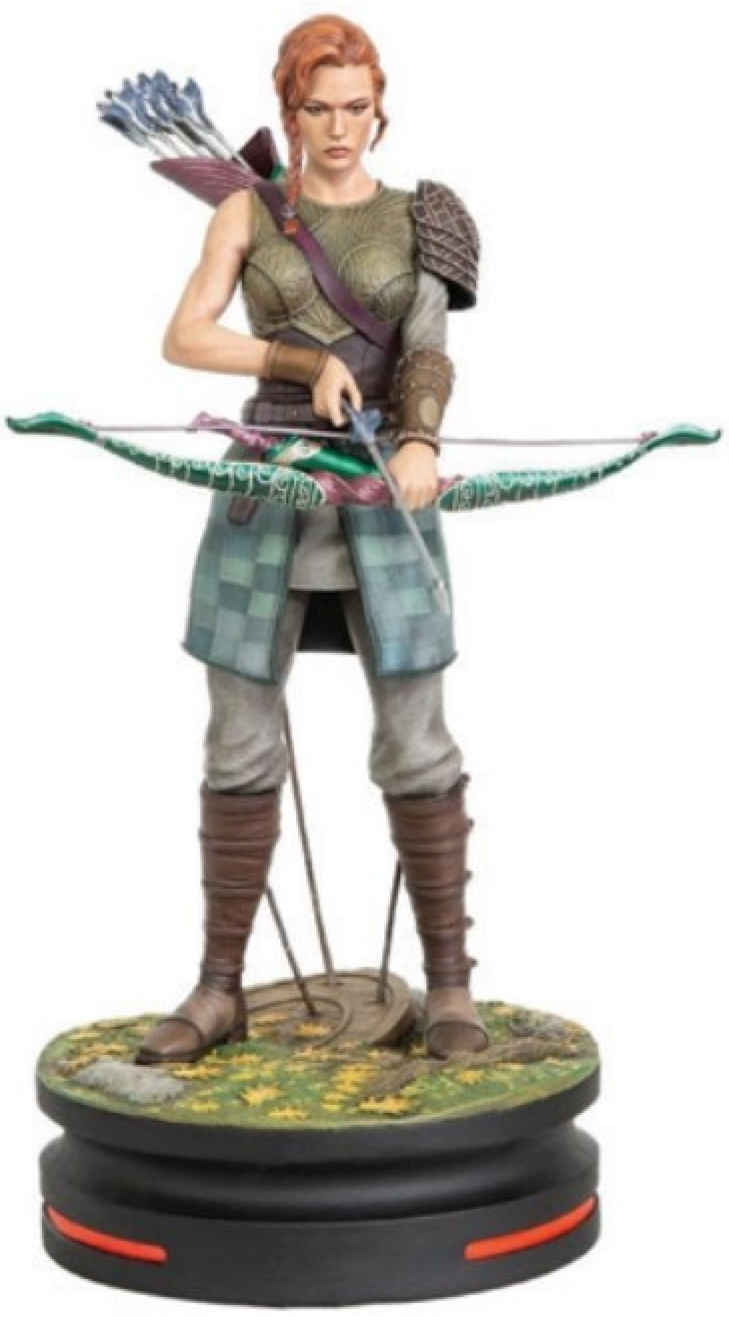
Transformers Megatron Replica Helmet

Inspired by the Generation 1 version of Megatron as see in the *Transformers* '80s cartoon, this GameStop exclusive, with unique design, is a fully wearable helmet with light-up eyes and authentic sounds and phrases. **$109.99**



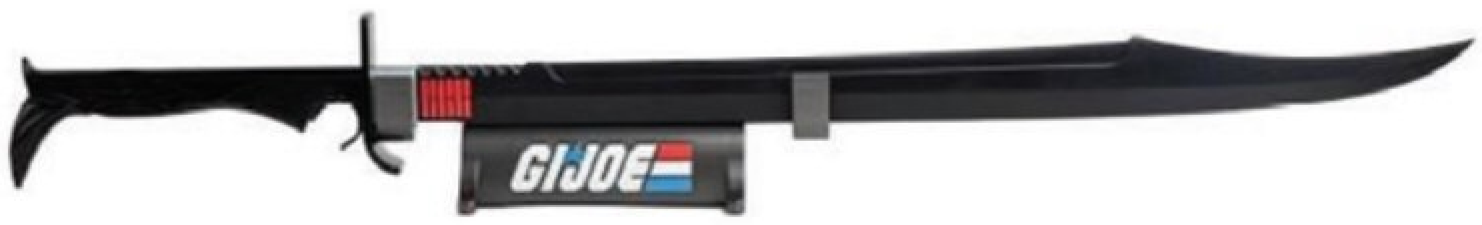
Dungeons & Dragons Gelatinous Cube Statue

The gelatinous cube is endowed with an insatiable hunger. These creatures scour dungeon passages, consuming living tissue while leaving bones and other materials undissolved. A cube that is well fed can be easier to spot, since its victims' bones, coins, and other objects can be seen suspended inside the creature. **$59.99**



Dungeons & Dragons Catti-Brie 8.65-in Statue

Catti-brie, armed with Taulmaril, her famous bow, and adorned with her mystical dagger. **$59.99**



G.I. Joe Snake Eyes Sword with Display Stand

This Modern Icons Replica: 1:1 GI Joe Snake Eyes Sword with Display Stand featuring the G.I. Joe insignia logo is a must-have collectible for G.I. Joe fans. **$109.99**

MODERN ICONS™

Toys + Collectibles

⑦ Transformers Core and Titan Class Figures

For collectors, the most notable thing about the Transformers line in recent years has been the consistency of quality across all the price points. Tiny 3.5-inch core class figures like Soundwave feature excellent sculpts and simple transformations, while the new towering Ark titan stands at 19 inches, including multiple bonus figures and blast effects, and the ability to shift between robot and the Autobot's iconic ship.

$10.99 (core), $149 (titan)
shop.hasbro.com

⑧ The Mandalorian Force FX Elite Darksaber

Created by the first Mandalorian to be inducted into the Jedi Order, the Darksaber would eventually come to represent leadership of the famed warriors, and has been wielded by the likes of Darth Maul, Moff Gideon, and Din Djarin. The replica includes a stunning detachable black blade limned in white LED lighting, which features progressive light-up effects, sound effects from the fan-favorite show, and an impressive metal hilt, along with a display stand. This is the way.

$264 | *hasbropulse.com*

Collectors' choice

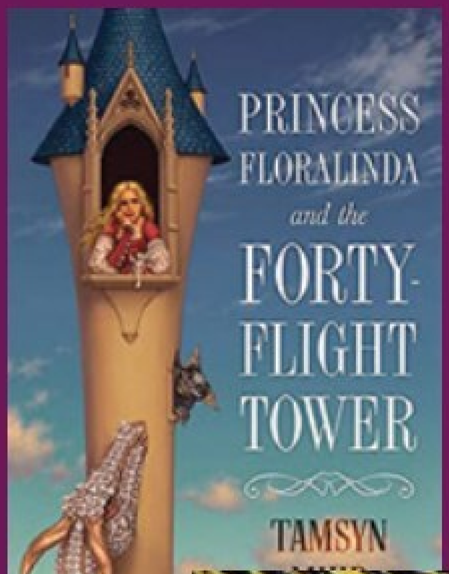
Books

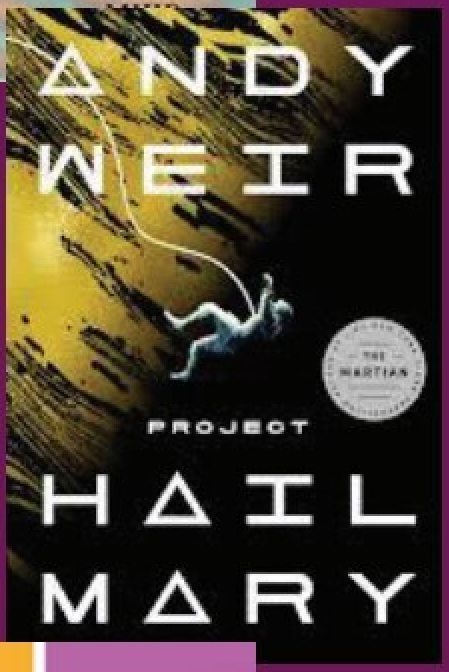
Princess Floralinda and the Forty-Flight Tower
by Tamsyn Muir
$45 | subterraneanpress.com

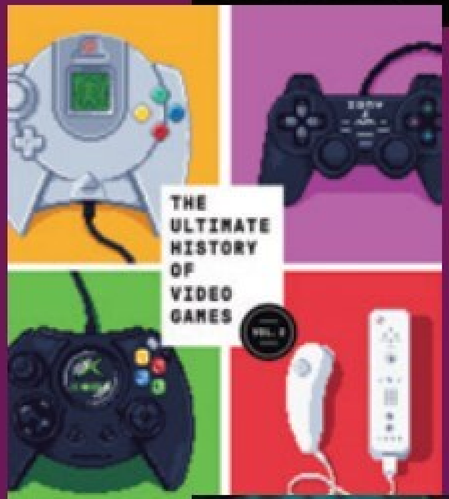
Project Hail Mary
by Andy Weir
$22.99 | andyweirauthor.com

The Ultimate History of Video Games, Volume 2
by Steven L. Kent
$25 | penguinrandomhouse.com

Under the Whispering Door
by T.J. Klune
$26.99 | us.macmillan.com


PRINCESS
FLORALINDA
and the
FORTY-FLIGHT TOWER
TAMSYN


ANDY WEIR
THE MARTIAN
PROJECT
HAIL MARY


THE ULTIMATE HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES
VOL. 2

TJ KLUNE
FREE EXTENDED PREVIEW
UNDER THE WHISPERING DOOR
DEATH IS ONLY THEIR BEGINNING.

Tabletop

BREW
WREN
LYRIC
PANDA SAURUS
TRAINED

❶ Brew

Don't let the whimsical art fool you. Brew is a nuanced and intriguing strategy game. You are a forest mystic, rolling dice each round to forage for components and create potions. Mixing area control and worker placement mechanics together, the straightforward dice-based play blossoms into a rich and choice-laden gameplay.

$29.95 | *pandasaurus.com*

❷ The Yawning Portal Inn Miniature Set

This iconic inn has long been a fixture of Dungeons & Dragons fiction, acting as a gateway to adventure in both figurative and literal ways. The prodigious terrain set can make for an awesome base of operations for your campaign's heroes, and a fitting spot to stage a big fight. But it's also the ideal display diorama backdrop for your minis collection, and beyond the 130+ included pieces, can be accentuated with an array of sold-separately accessories, including additional beds, bottles, bars, tables, and more. The titular portal is especially cool, with color-changing LEDs and an infinity mirror effect to replicate the descent into Undermountain.

$349 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❸ Snakesss

This clever party game puts forward a series of multiple-choice questions and gives you two minutes to discuss each answer. But one player is the Snake, and they're trying to manipulate the group into choosing the wrong answer. Embracing a delightful mix of social deduction and deception, Snakesss is an ideal pick for game nights for bigger groups of up to eight players.

$25 | *bigpotato.com*

SNAKESSS
Don't let them charm you into choosing the wrong answer
ANSWER
ANSWER
ANSWER
ANSWER

For parties!

HYPERX
TAKE CONTROL
DESIGNED FOR XBOX DESIGNED FOR
HYPERX
CLOUDX™
DESIGNED FOR XBOX DESIGNED FOR
HYPERX CLOUDX
STINGER™
CORE
Official Licensed Product
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Tabletop

❹ Mickey and the Beanstalk

$19.99 | *funkogames.com*

❺ D&D Dice Tower

Welcome a dose of nostalgia into your next D&D game night with this officially licensed and light-up dice tower; just remove the head and toss in your dice, and when they roll out from the base, you can find out if you rolled that natural 20. The sculpt is a lovely homage to the 1st edition AD&D Player's Handbook art by D.A. Trampier, though it looks as if the party finally absconded with that right-eye gem.

$49.99 | *gamestop.com*

❻ Alien: Fate of the Nostromo

$29.99 | *ravensburger.com*

❼ Oath: Chronicles of Empire and Exile

Follow the shifting power tides of a vast fantasy empire in a sprawling generational saga. Each player is an individual working to their own ends, from guiding the nation as its chancellor, an allied citizen hoping to gain influence, or a rebel working toward open revolution. Whether you muster armies in the open, or quietly gain influence in the shadows, someone eventually comes out on top. In a fascinating twist, subsequent sessions use the events of the last to inform setup, as if you're charting the grand history of the land as it comes to pass.

$120 | *ledergames.com*

❽ Descent: Legends of the Dark

The Descent franchise has a long history of providing some of the best dungeon-crawling around, but Legends of the Dark is a totally new twist on the experience. The immense box includes nearly 50 miniatures and a ton of 3D terrain for multi-level exploration. But it's the integrated digital companion app that sets the game apart, enriching storytelling, aiding in setup, and facilitating combat. While still very much a board game for the table, video gamers will appreciate the hybrid experience and deep immersion.

$179 | *fantasyflightgames.com*

4
Great for family night

6
LAMBERT, 4
PARKER, 4
BRETT, 3
DALLAS, 5
RIPLEY, 4

7
Cradle
Provinces
The Hidden Place

5

Dualpower Crossbow
Crossbow
Cautious
Minor
After you interact, enemy is within 4 sp
Plate of the Bloodstone
Menacing. Plate. Tainted.
Crimson Potion

8

RPGs

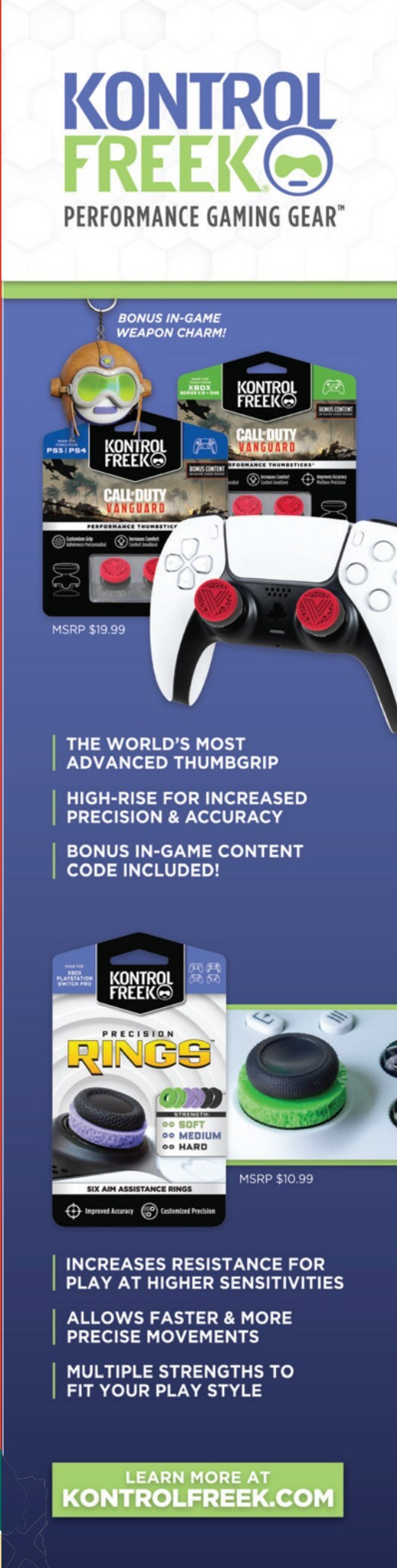
D&D: The Wild Beyond The Witchlight
$49.95 | dnd.wizards.com

Fallout RPG Core Rulebook
$54 | modiphius.net

MÖRK BORG Artpunk RPG
$32.24 | morkborg.com

Starfinder Galaxy Exploration Manual
$39.99 | paizo.com

The Wild Beyond The Witchlight
A Feywild Adventure
Fallout
The Post Nuclear Tabletop Role Playing Game
Mörk Borg
Starfinder
Galaxy Exploration Manual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Active

1

Best VR for exercise

❶ Oculus Quest 2

Oculus has doubled the storage size of its base Quest 2 unit to 128GB but maintained the high-speed processing and excellent resolution for games and videos, all at the same price as the earlier 64 GB unit. This wireless headset should be the undisputed choice for active (and portable) VR use. Whether you're moving with one of the music apps like Beat Saber or Dance Central, or one of the more fitness-focused apps like Supernatural, you can definitely break a sweat.

$299 | ***oculus.com***

❷ Bolt Pro Electric Bike

If you enjoy a ride out in the open air, but you wouldn't mind a little boost, Jetson's electric bike offers an entry into the category without costing you the arm and leg you need to start pedaling. The Bolt Pro can hit over 15 miles an hour with its single-speed gear, which can manage both flats and hills. 14-inch wheels, dual disc brakes, and a 350-watt rear wheel motor pack more punch than the small profile might suggest, and you can ride up to 30 miles on a charge if you don't mind putting in a bit of pedal assist.

$599 | ***ridejetson.com***

2

ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers 6-in Pink Ranger Action Figure

Over 20 points of articulation for high poseability. **$29.99**

Star Wars: The Black Series The Mandalorian – Death Watch Helmet

The warrior clans of Mandalore were believed to have been wiped out ages ago, their tattered remnants exiled. Their ways were resurrected, and with them, their legendary combat armor that was feared across the galaxy. Featuring a flip-down rangefinder with flashing LED lights and an illuminated heads-up display, fans can imagine what it was like for the members of the Mandalorian Death Watch to suit up for galactic action! **$119.99**

Marvel Legends Doctor Strange Eye of Agamotto with Stand

Green and glowing at the center, this premium roleplay Eye of Agamotto electronic talisman is the ultimate combination of costume and collectible! Exceptional detailing for play or display makes this an exotic addition to any Marvel fan's collection. **$49.99**

Marvel's Spider-Man Miles Morales Action Figure

Marvel Gamerverse 6-inch action figure. **$22.99**

ONLY AT GAMESTOP

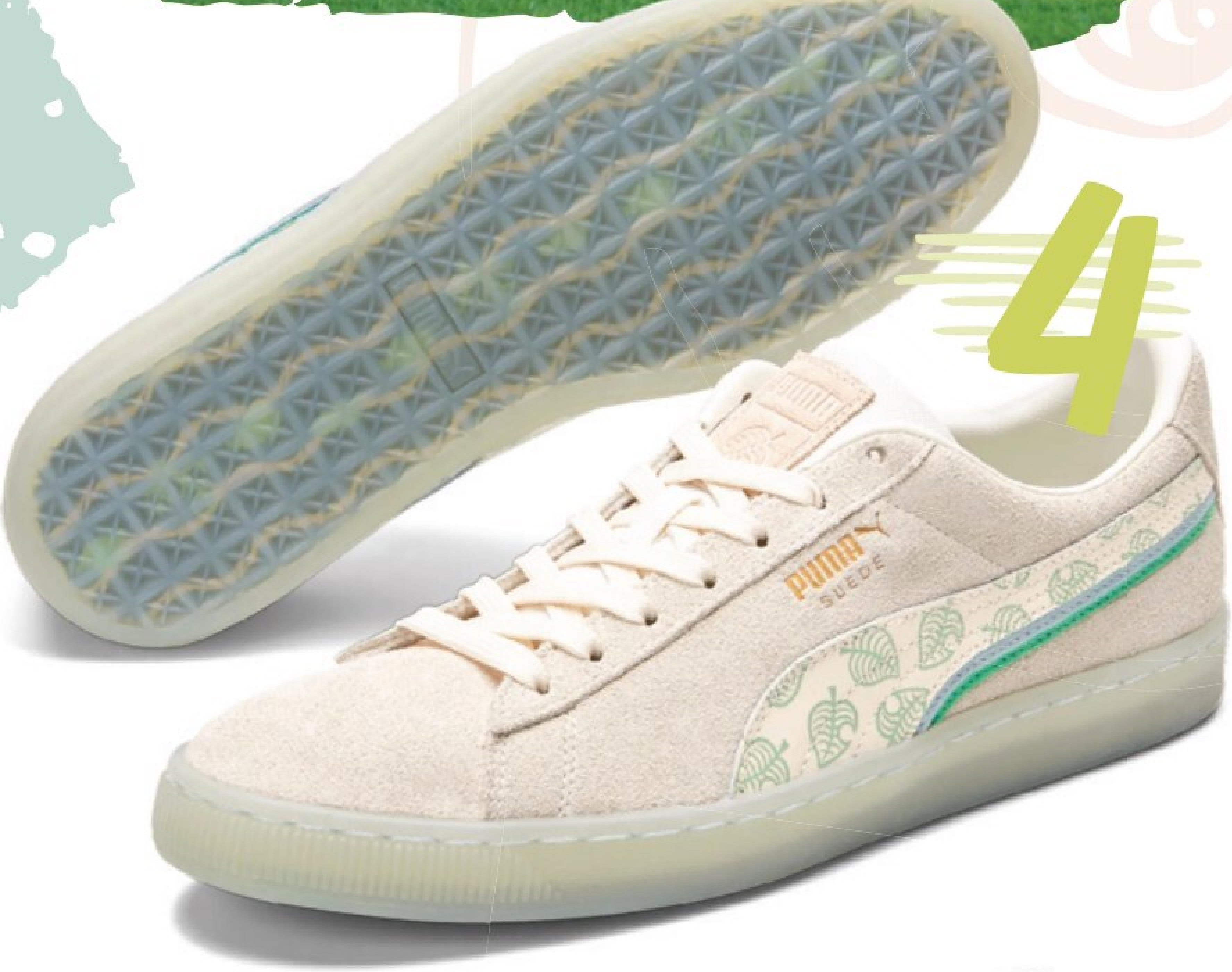
Mighty Morphin Power Rangers Pink Ranger Replica Helmet

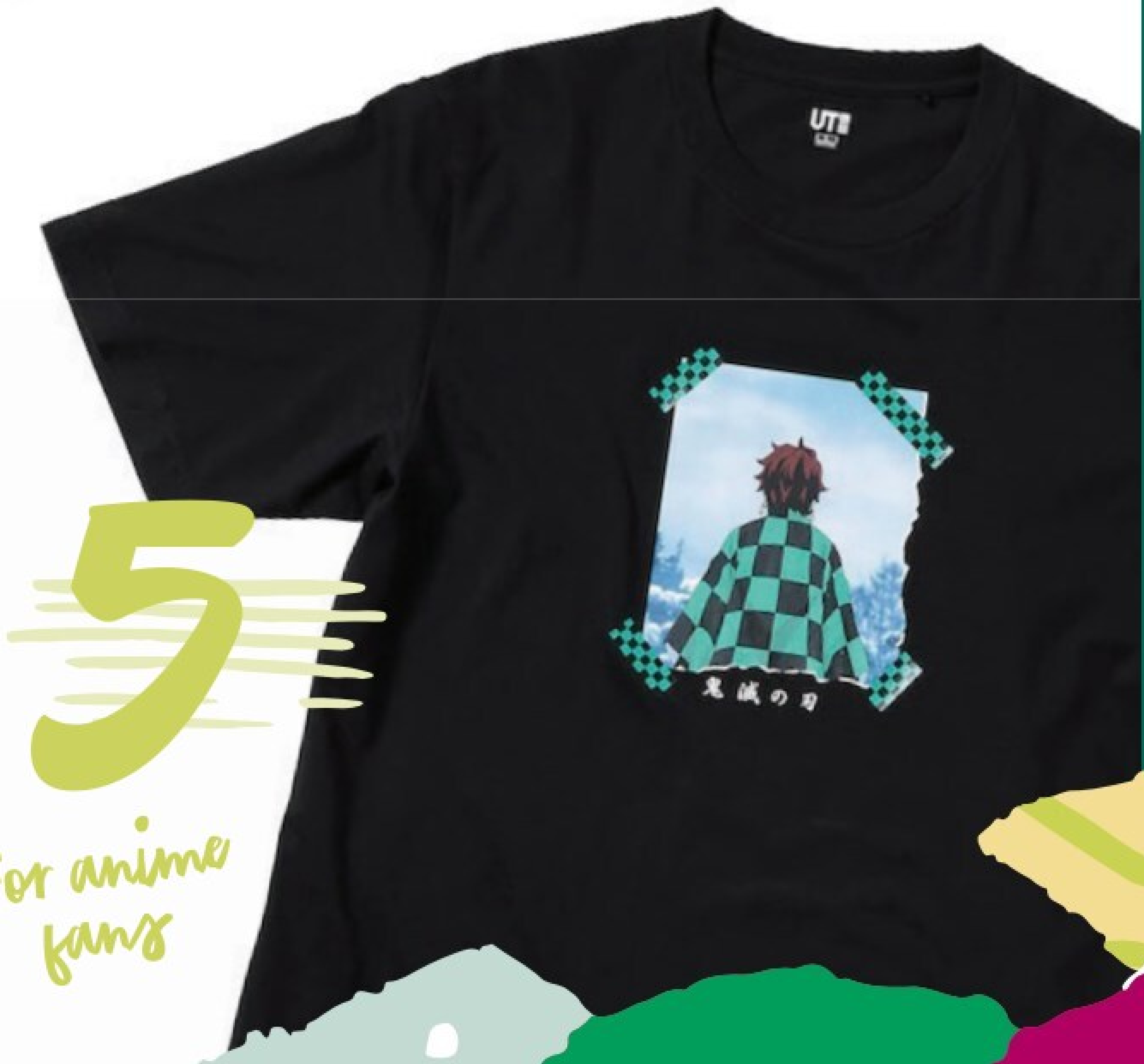
Adjustable fit. Display stand included. **$99.99**

ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Star Wars The Mandalorian The Armorer Action Figure

This 6-inch-scale figure features premium detail, multiple points of articulation, and vintage-look packaging inspired by the series' aesthetic. **$26.99**





For anime fans

❸ Rolflex Pro

Non-gamers may scoff at the idea of pain or injury from long play sessions, but that doesn't change the reality that carpal tunnel and other repetitive stress can lead to very real discomfort. This leverage-based roller is built to address those kinds of injuries and relieve muscular tension from more traditional exercise, using foam rollers that aid recovery and pain management.

$69.95 | *rolflexpro.com*

❹ Animal Crossing: New Horizons Suede Sneakers

$90 | *us.puma.com*

❺ Demon Slayer Graphic Tees

$19.90 | *uniqlo.com*

Music

Call Me If You Get Lost: Tyler the Creator
$13.99 | callmeifyougetlost.com

Glow On: Turnstile
$10 | turnstilehardcore.com

Happier Than Ever: Billie Eilish
$20 | billieeilish.com

Screen Violence: CHVRCHES
$13.98 | chvrch.es

Happier Than Ever

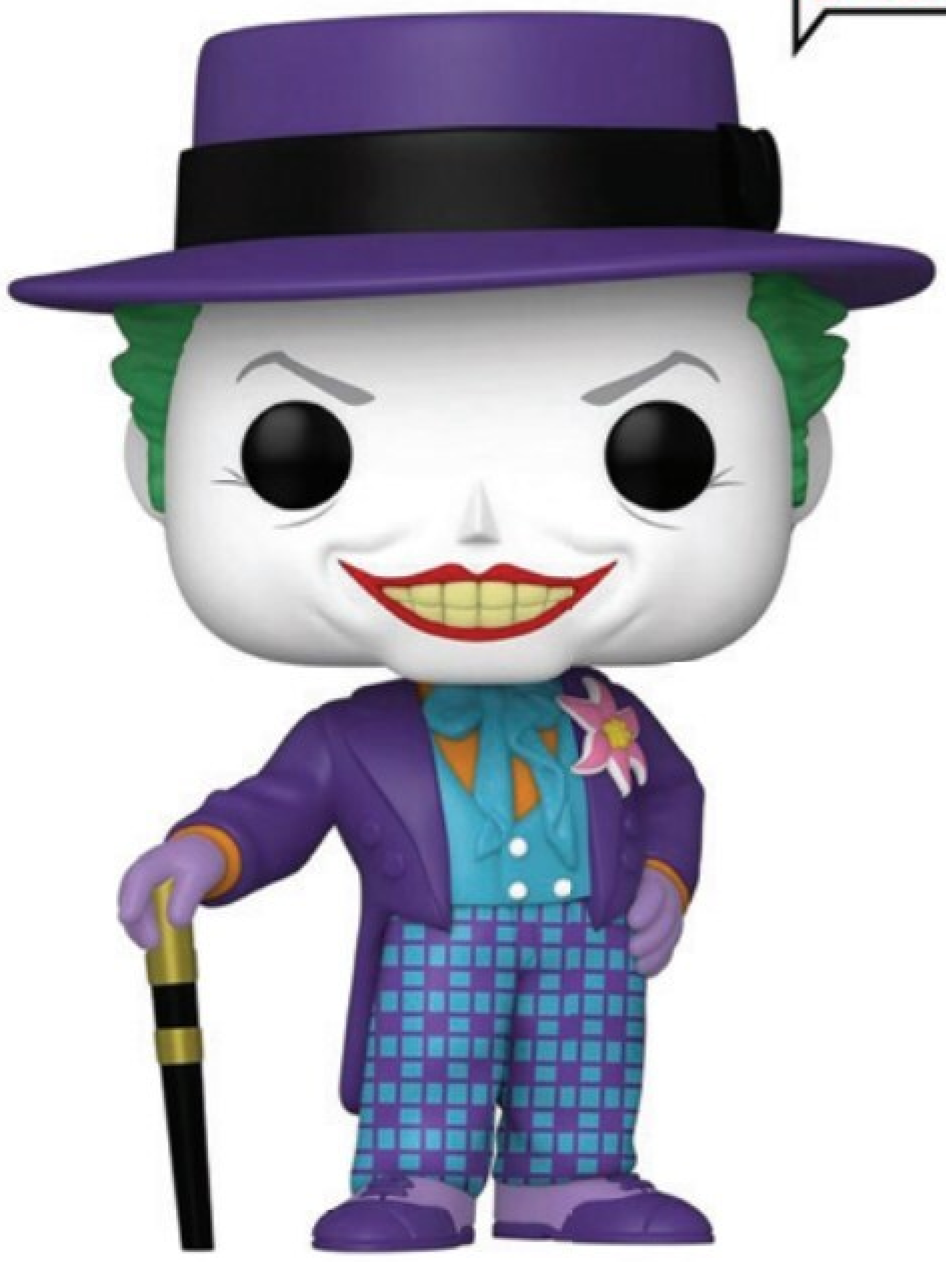
Funkoverse Marvel 100 Strategy Game

Marvel's Infinity War explodes into the Funkoverse in an epic board game showdown between The Avengers Captain America, Iron Man, Black Panther and Black Widow. **$39.99**

Funko Advent Calendar
Pokémon 2021 Countdown Calendar

Jump start your quest to catch them all! Vinyl figures range in height, depending on character, from approximately 1.25-inches to 2.15-inches tall. **$39.99**

10" SUPER SIZED POP!



ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Funko POP! Animation: Batman 1989 Joker with Hat 10-in Jumbo Vinyl Figure

You'll have the last laugh when you add Pop! Jumbo Batman 1989 Joker (with hat) to your vinyl figure collection! **$39.99**

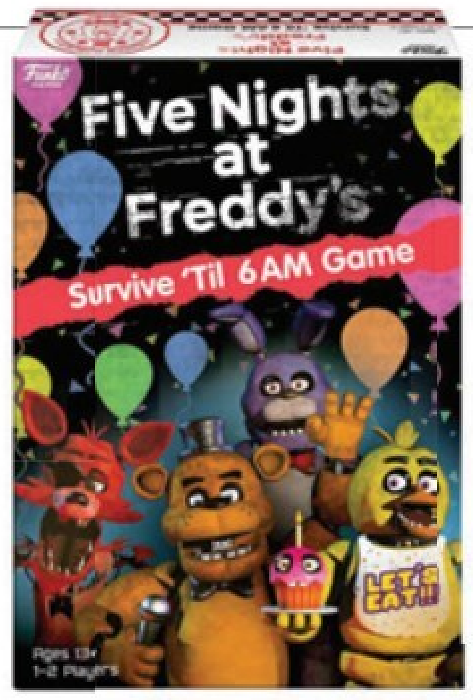
ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Funko DC DCeased Mystery Box

A must for Batman fans and DC lovers! You'll receive 1 Pop! vinyl figure, 1 collector Pop! pin, 1 logo decal, and 1 keychain – each featuring Regular or Bloody versions of Batman and Joker! **$19.99**

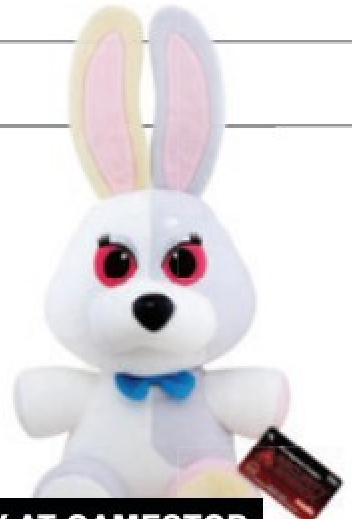
Funko POP! Advent Calendar 2020: The Nightmare Before Christmas

Bring Halloween Town home for the holidays! Figures vary in height depending on character, maximum 2-inches tall. **$39.99**



Five Nights at Freddy's: Survive 'Til 6AM Board Game

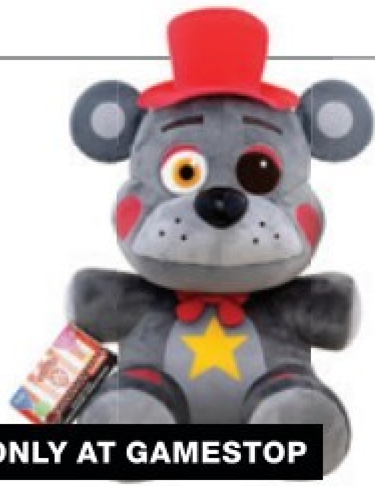
You're the night shift security guard for a Freddy Fazbear's Pizza. Beware the animatronics that activate on their own at night! Each turn you'll check the security cameras and react to the movements in the dark. Choose to turn on the lights or close doors to protect yourself — but watch out! Each reaction depletes your limited power. Keep Freddy and his friends out of your office until you can clock out at 6:00 am. Each game plays approx. 20 minutes. Perfect for 1-2 players, ages 13 and up. **$16.99**



ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Vannie Plush

16" Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach character plush. **$29.99**



ONLY AT GAMESTOP

Lefty Plush

16" Five Nights at Freddy's: Pizzeria Simulator character plush. **$29.99**

Funko

Tech

❶ Hex Gaming PS5 Rival Controller

Squarely targeted at gamers looking to step up into professional play, the Rival is a heavily modified official PS5 controller, specifically built to boost eSports competitive edge and allow full customization. Interchangeable thumbsticks, button reassignment to the added rear buttons, as well as the availability of hair triggers are all included features to support high performance. The complete color selection for individual parts lets you make the controller your own.

$289 | *hexgaming.com*

❷ Quadcast S Microphone

Whether you're aiming to up your stream audio quality, or you just want a better mic setup on Discord or Teamspeak, the Quadcast S manages that rare feat of high style, high functionality, and ease-of-use that makes for an easy recommendation. The USB plug-in makes it simple to get started, the sound quality is excellent, and the slim design and built-in shock mount are thoughtfully designed. However, it's the variable RGB color scheme that is the real attention grabber, letting you color your lighting to match your mood.

$159 | *hyperxgaming.com*

❸ HyperSonic DX Wireless HD In-Ear Headphones

$79.99 | *linearflux.com*

❹ 8BitDo Xbox Media Remote

Compatible with Xbox Series X/S and Xbox One, these stylish remotes are a great choice if your Microsoft console doubles as your primary disc and streaming video player. Backlit buttons and ergonomic setup lead to more user-friendly navigation through your videos than with the system's game controller, and 8BitDo maintains its reputation for solid peripherals at very reasonable costs.

$19.99 (no numpad, white),
$24.99 (numpad, black)
8bitdo.com

❺ Samsung Frame TV

The Frame TV takes the obvious space-saving benefits of a wall-hung flat-panel, and adds customizable bevels and an especially thin profile. The result looks like a piece of art on your wall. That effect is further enhanced because the TV can be set to display actual museum-quality art when turned off, with an ambient light sensor to have it match the room's current atmosphere. A subscription gets you thousands of art options, but gamers should appreciate the partnership with Xbox, which includes 20+ free art pieces from franchises like Halo and Ori. Of course, turn the TV on, and Samsung's excellent 4K QLED display will have those (and other) games looking stellar.

$599 (32-inch) - $2,699 (75-inch)
samsung.com

2
For streamers

3
4
5

steelseries
Arctis 5
$99.99
Rival 5
$59.99
Apex 3
$49.99
GIVE THE GIFT OF
RGB
THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Gaming with hearing loss

❻ AccuVoice AV357 Wood TV Speaker

This home audio solution ticks a lot of boxes for an affordable soundbar, but especially impressed us for its focus on gamers with partial hearing impairment. While the three built-in speakers produce a solid and clear soundscape for anyone, including a virtual surround effect, the optional AccuVoice feature boosts the frequencies of voices, even over significant background noise, effects, or music. If you frequently find yourself missing dialogue in games and movies, it's a game-changer.

$349 | *zvox.com*

❼ TiVo Stream 4K

We have a wealth of options for how to connect to streaming content, but the TiVo Stream 4K is among the best and most affordable choices for a unified experience across all the services you might use, offering UHD support, Dolby Vision HDR, and Dolby Atmos for the vast majority of streaming platforms, including Netflix, Prime Video, Disney+, Hulu, and more. The voice remote, high speed, and united search across all your content at once may have you wondering why you waited this long to switch.

$29.99 | *tivo.com*

❽ 1942 X Replicade

New Wave has gone to great pains to perfectly capture the look, feel, and controls of the classic 1942 Lowboy arcade cabinet – only at one-sixth its original size. The 11-inch tall collector's piece can play both 1942 and 1943 flawlessly, and even comes with a bonus mini arcade stick for two-person play. Plug-and-play HDTV connectivity offers that big-screen option when you're ready to leave the miniature world. ◆

$149 | *newwavetoys.com*

ROMSTAR / CAPCOM
1942
ROMSTAR
ROMSTAR
1942
1942

TV+Film

Indiana Jones 4-Movie Collection (UHD)
$89.99 | paramountmovies.com

Mortal Kombat Legends: Battle of the Realms
$29.98 (Blu-ray) | warnerbros.com

Neon Genesis Evangelion
$45.99 | store.gkids.com

Zack Snyder's Justice League
$24.99 (Blu-ray) | snydercut.com

4-MOVIE COLLECTION
INDIANA JONES
BLU-RAY + DIGITAL CODE
MORTAL KOMBAT LEGENDS BATTLE OF THE REALMS
BLU-RAY
NEON GENESIS EVANGELION
ZACK SNYDER'S JUSTICE LEAGUE

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SOUR CREAM
AINTS ROW SAINTS

CHALUPACABR

SAINTS 4

THE SAINTS ARE NO STRANGERS TO HUMBLE BEGINNINGS.

Developed by Volition, the studio behind Red Faction and Descent, Saints Row's 2006 debut launched during an open-world renaissance in gaming. With iconic series like Grand Theft Auto and The Elder Scrolls in the process of redefining the genre, a newcomer like Volition had to emphatically kick in the door and seize its own identity if it wanted to leave a mark.

While it didn't make a name for itself right out of the gate, subsequent entries had Saints Row deviating from and expanding upon the formula presented by games like GTA in pronounced ways thanks to customization, over-the-top weapons and powers, and larger-than-life stories. Fast forward a decade, and the Saints Row franchise was not only a part of gaming's broader lexicon, but in the game's universe, the Saints themselves conquered the world as a multimedia empire, the ruling party of the United States, and the saviors of humanity. To say the Saints Row franchise forged its own identity and escaped the shadows of its predecessors is an understatement.

Today, Saints Row is no longer the new kid on the block. Instead, a new reboot of the now-beloved franchise carries on that underdog spirit not through the franchise's struggle against its competitors but rather through its story. With a new cast of young characters hoping to make a name for themselves in a city full of well-established rivals, the narrative of Volition's reboot suits the franchise perfectly.

Now, with a refreshed take and an approach far more grounded than the computer simulations and trips to Hell of past entries, Volition's flagship series is back and ready to reclaim its place in the open-world genre.

This is the new face of Saints Row.

SANTO ILESO

It may be a new city and cast, but players can still expect a humorous tone that straddles the line between Saints Row 2 and Saints Row: The Third

A CLEAN SLATE AND A FRESH START

When the first Saints Row came out, its similarities to Grand Theft Auto were unavoidable. While it introduced new elements such as character customization into the open-world formula, even members of Volition admit it borrowed heavily from GTA, which just two years prior received a new entry in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.

"There's just no two ways about it; GTA was a big influence," says Volition chief creative officer Jim Boone. "We had our own stories we wanted to tell, but we were taking a whole lot of lessons from GTA."

It may have unabashedly worn its primary influence on its sleeve, but the series' debut garnered positive reception (receiving an 8.75 out of 10 from *Game Informer*), and the end of the story hinted heavily at a forthcoming sequel. Two years later, in 2008, players got that follow up in the first multiplatform entry in the series, Saints Row 2.

This sequel solidified the series' gameplay style and began branching off from the formula established by GTA. Players returned to a rebuilt Stilwater, but this time with enhanced customization options – including the option to select a feminine physique. This entry added flight options like helicopters and jets, but the most significant advancement came from the introduction of online cooperative play.

Saints Row 2 was another hit for the franchise, but it was 2011's Saints Row: The Third that hammered home the tone the franchise is known for to this day. Irreverent humor, over-the-top scenarios, and zany weapons further differentiated the franchise from anything else on the market. At the start of Saints Row: The Third, the gang has grown into a multimedia empire, with energy drinks and Hollywood adaptations showcasing just how far the crew has come. In the opening hours alone, you pull off a high-flying bank heist, skydive from a hostage situation, and rob a military armory of its guns and drone technology.

Saints Row: The Third took the series to new heights in forging its own identity. The studio wanted to create an expansion to continue the story of the Saints after the events of the base game, but when the idea of turning them into superheroes came up, the creative juices started flowing. The brainstorming sessions were so fruitful that the team decided to convert the expansion into a complete game.

If Saints Row: The Third dipped its toe into the pool of absurdity, 2013's Saints Row IV plunged it into the depths. You start Saints Row IV as the President of the United States amidst an alien invasion; it doesn't get much more bombastic than that. Much of the game takes place in a computer simulation of Earth as you use a suite of superpowers like what you'd see in *The Matrix* to topple the alien empire. After releasing the 2015 standalone expansion, Gat Out of Hell, where players literally entered the depths of the underworld to fight Satan, Volition realized the franchise had reached a natural resting point.

SANTO ILESO
US
66

"It was never spoken out loud with clarity of something like, 'This is it. We have specifically taken this as far as we would like, and when we do the next game, by God, we're going to reboot it!'" Boone says. "But I think that everyone had that vibe that we just had fun taking this thing as far as we possibly could and leaving it all out there."

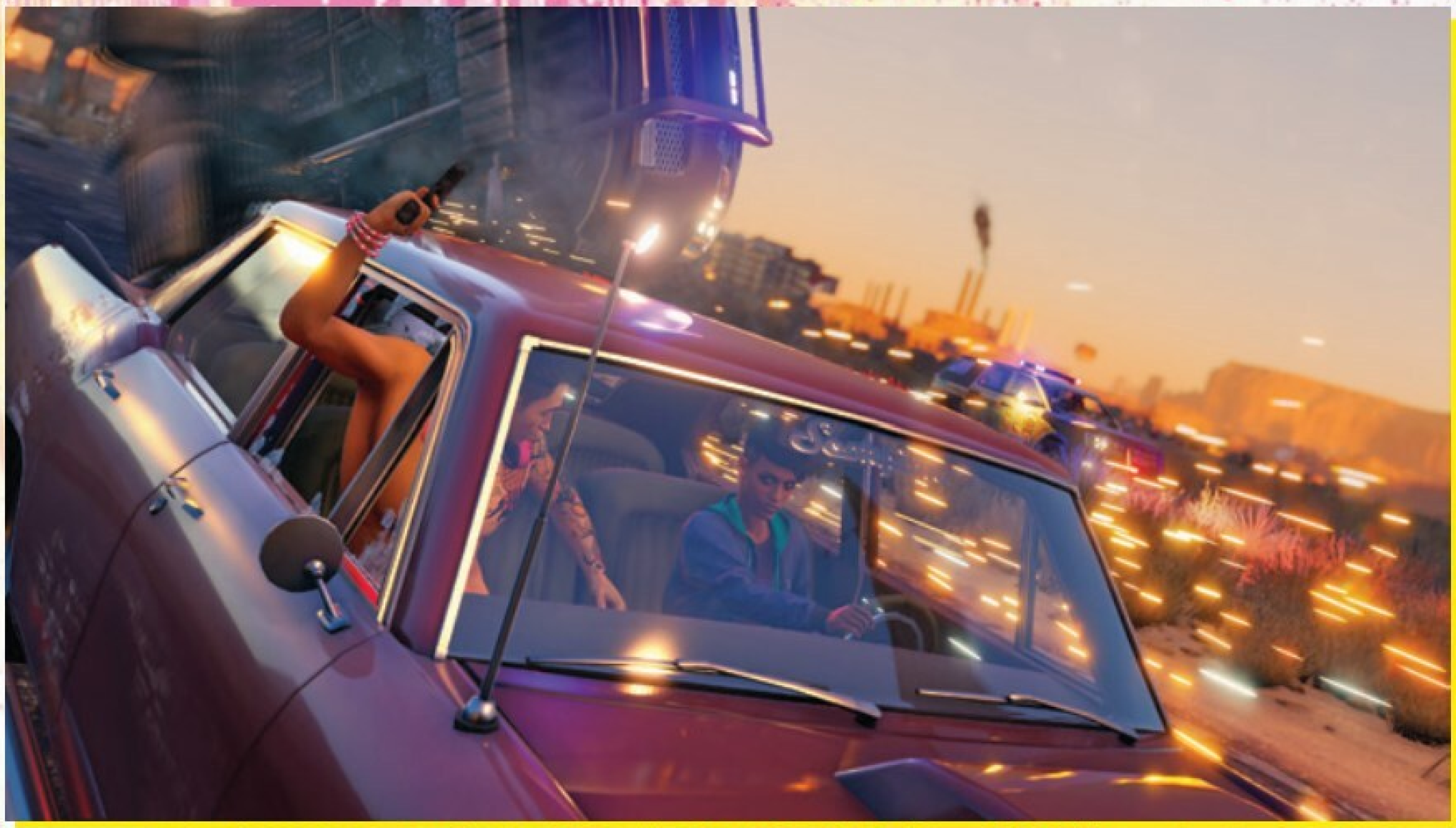
The studio put Saints Row on ice and worked on Agents of Mayhem, a 2017 action game with loose connections to the Saints Row universe. But Agents of Mayhem did not receive the same level of acclaim as the Saints Row games, and fans clamored for the return of their favorite franchise. This groundswell of fan enthusiasm combined with the studio's own passion for the series made Volition eager to dive back into the world of the Saints with fresh eyes.

The team reflected on how it wanted to approach the franchise following Gat Out of Hell. Volition considered options like continuing the story of Saints Row IV or flashing back to before that game, but the most viable option in the eyes of the developer was to reboot the series entirely, with a tone and style landing somewhere between Saints Row 2 and The Third.

"[This approach] allows us to build on top of it," says narrative designer Jennifer Campbell. "Once you add everything and the kitchen sink to the game, it's difficult to then plan for future games after that because if you start with the climax, where do you go from there? A lot of fans have been wanting us to go back to … a more grounded game. We were trying to set up this reboot for its best chance for evolution."

Volition may have scaled back the absurdity of the series' most recent entries but make no mistake: Saints Row is still all about satirizing today's world through irreverent humor, profane actions, and an anti-establishment attitude. "We knew we didn't want to abandon the humor or some of the more extreme things we can put into the game," Boone says. "But we also knew that those extremes couldn't necessarily be as far as they were in Saints Row: The Third. And that was a conscious thought on our part: Don't go too far. That doesn't mean we don't have plenty of outlandish things in this; it's just that when you think of the bar of Saints Row: The Third, I think sometimes people forget just how crazy we got with some of the things."

This rebooted approach, which includes a fresh cast of characters in an all-new city, allows Volition to ditch the previous games' accumulated narrative and gameplay baggage. "It really freed us up to be able to tell the story we wanted to," Boone says. "Something the community would talk to us a lot about in Saints Row one through IV was, 'Volition, it would be so amazing if you could do some sort of prequel and show how the Saints get formed!' … With this, it gave us the opportunity to do that origin story, but not doing something that was set in the '80s or something like that to try and tell the origin of the Third Street Saints [from the previous games]. Now we can tell the origin story of these Saints."



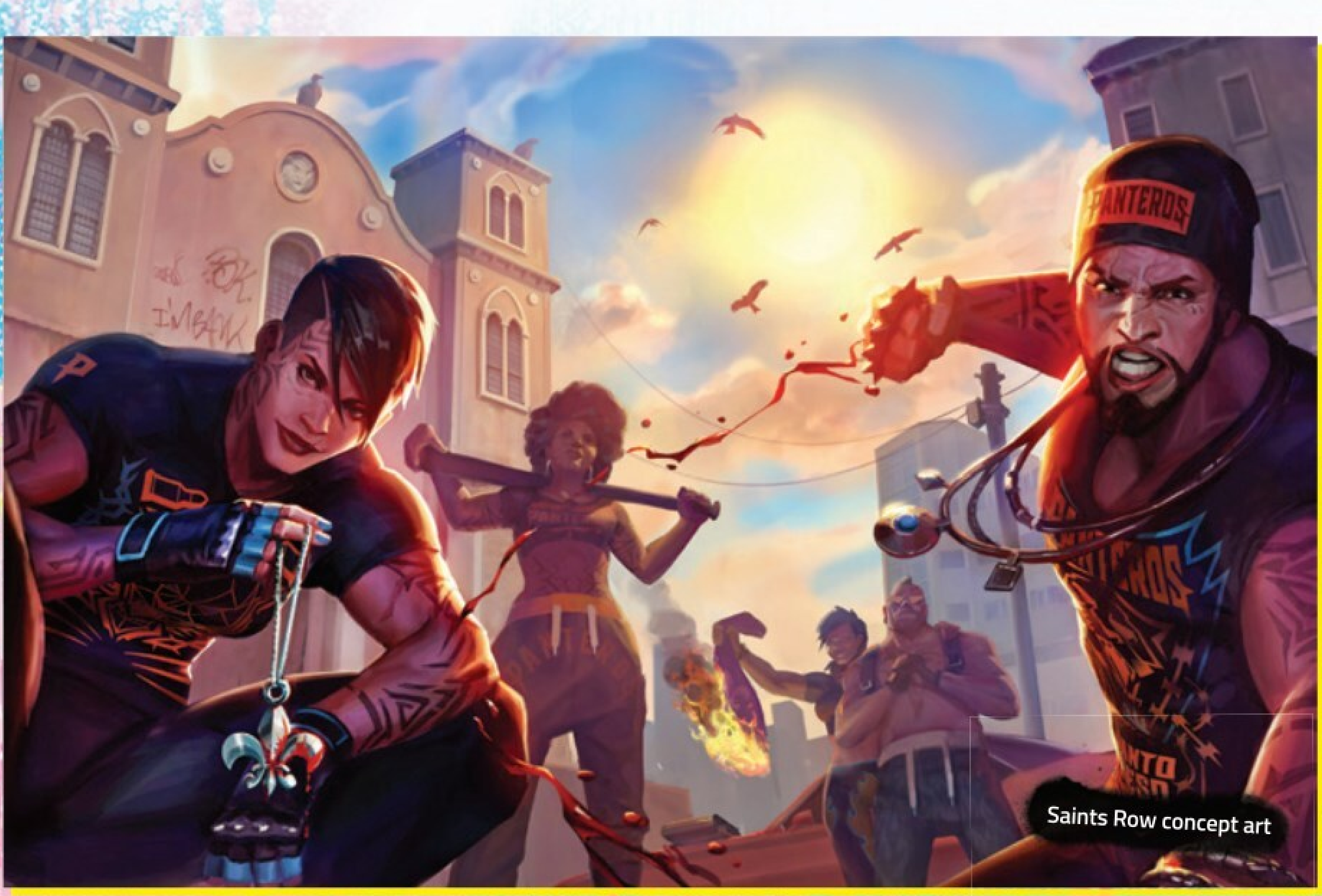
A CREW OF TWO

Ever since Saints Row 2, cooperative play has been a trademark element of the series. In the upcoming Saints Row, you can participate in two-player drop-in/drop-out online co-op as you explore Santo Ileso together. Co-op play is untethered, meaning you can explore the city independent of one another, but if one player enters a mission, the other warps to them and joins the task at hand.

On top of standard play, Volition tells us you're able to prank your partner. We don't yet know what that means, but the development team is excited about the feature. "It's something totally different that we've never done before that players are going to absolutely love," says creative director Brian Traficante. "When they get together, they get access to the pranking system, and you can just let your imagination run with 'What would you do to prank your co-op player?'"

The decision to start with new characters wasn't one team members made lightly, but they now feel it was the correct decision. "It's definitely nerve-wracking at the beginning because there's such a high bar to meet," Campbell says. "We wanted to make really well-rounded characters because if they're one-note, they're not going to stand the test of time. We looked at the past characters, and what aspects about them really made them stand out, and what roles they filled. At no point did we want to just make a cookie cutter of, 'We need a Johnny Gat character so let's just reskin him as somebody else.' We wanted all of these characters to be able to stand on their own."

With the beloved characters of prior Saints Row games left in the past, Volition charted new territory for a new gang poised to take over a new city.



Saints Row concept art

SAINTS AND SINNERS

In starting fresh, Volition can set the table with a new cast of Saints. Your fully customizable character may eventually become known as "The Boss," but that's hardly the case at the start of the game. As the story begins, you control a low-level member of a militaristic faction known as Marshall in Santo Ileso, a city inspired by the American Southwest. Life is hard, and rent is expensive, so you put aside your gangs' differences and decide to split an apartment with fellow grunts from your rival factions. Neenah is a member of Los Panteros, a musclebound street gang full of homegrown Santo Ileso residents, while Kevin is a member of The Idols, an anarchistic group hoping to bring Santo Ileso to a screeching halt.

The final member of the crew is Eli, who often serves as the intellectual voice of reason, providing structure to the team. Instead of cutting his teeth as a member of one of the three gangs, Eli's background is in real estate, though his criminal record is far from spotless. He comes to Santo Ileso to find fortune as a businessman in the real estate market. Instead, he ends up joining your character, Neenah, and Kevin in this seemingly doomed-to-fail roommate situation.

The rival roommates clash heads occasionally, but they quickly establish a house code where they have to leave their work lives at the door when they enter the apartment. "The relative value of paying one-quarter of the rent was worth more to them in some ways than the difficulty," says lead mission narrative designer Jeremy Bernstein.

They need each other to survive; after all, low-level members don't pull in the big bucks. Because of this, the roommates begin taking part in criminal activity together, like robbing stores, to make ends meet. They may come from different backgrounds, but their skills and personalities complement each other well. Your character is the motivating force and the one you can trust to put the group above all else. Kevin is a great fighter who prioritizes his friends' well-being and has many connections throughout the city. Neenah is an all-star driver and the best mechanic in the gang; she also knows the city better than anyone else.

Finally, Eli is the brains of the operation and serves as the glue that brings and holds the crew together. "He's the one that keeps telling them through a lot of motivational tapes and motivational books that, 'We should be out doing this for ourselves and controlling our own destinies,'" says creative director Brian Traficante.

I see this group dynamic in full form through the first mission I play. "Making Rent" follows the newly formed friend group as they rob a loan office called Payday. After Eli lays out the plan (which includes karaoke afterward), the crew rolls up to the store. Before the security guard, who is busy telling a braggadocios story into his phone, can realize it, he has a gun pointed at his head and your character telling him to "walk away before the phrase 'dead-end job' gets literal." The security guard has no choice but to run for his life, getting rid of the shop's only real line of defense.

The friends kick in the door, weapons drawn. Neenah tells the lone patron of the store they don't want her money and to leave, but the cashier talks a big game. Kevin knocks him out with his left hand before he can finish telling Neenah just how big of a mistake she's making. Eli hops over the counter and dusts the safe for fingerprints. "This guy had his password be a bunch of fives," Eli says incredulously as he grabs the cash. "I'm just sayin', he could have at least made us work for it."

From here, the plan is for Eli and Kevin to get home with the money while you and Neenah lead the police on a chase. The cops take the bait, following my car instead of the one containing the stolen money. Unfortunately, that now means I need to escape.

In this new version of Saints Row, driving is revamped. Moving around on foot is much more realistic than in Saints Row IV, so I'm happy to learn that racing down the backroads and drifting around corners feels tight and responsive. However, I'm most impressed by the new car combat options. In mobile gunfights, you can climb on top of the roof to have more control over your shooting. But, since I'm behind the wheel, I opt to run the pursuing police off the road instead. I can juke the car in the specified direction using the X button and the left stick on my Xbox controller. After running a few police cars into bridges and buildings, I use the satisfying new drift mechanics to create distance and outrun them.

Saints Marching To Their Own Beat

In our talks with Saints Row developer Volition, it quickly became apparent that it sees customization as a non-negotiable element of the core Saints Row experience. Ever since the first game came out in 2006, players have customized their character's appearance. Those customization options have only expanded throughout the series' history, growing beyond simply being able to choose how your character looks and sounds.

"Customization is one of the definitive things that Saints Row is known for," chief creative officer at Volition Jim Boone says. "Not just the characters, but even the vehicles. And in Saints Row IV, we introduced weapon customization. It's extremely woven into the DNA to the degree where I feel like if you don't have customization, it's hard to say that you're a full Saints Row game."

Volition has taken everything to the next level, giving players the power to tweak standard options like eye color and skin tone, add prosthetics to the main character, and even censor your protagonist's nude body with things like emojis. "We've achieved dreams," says art director Frank Marquart. "There were things that we really tried and we could not do on previous titles that we can now do in this game."

While we don't know precisely what elements of The Boss we'll be able to customize when Saints Row launches next year, you continue to unlock new options for your character, weapons, vehicles, and more. "A target from day one is to be the kings of customization," says creative director Brian Traficante. "We want to give our players all the things they've had in the past and more. That's what we've done."

Saints Row may reel in some of the more over-the-top elements of the franchise's most recent entries, but it has taken the customization elements to new levels. You can create a character anywhere on the gender spectrum, consisting of any race, or even go wild and create a complete monster.

On top of character customization, you can tweak other cosmetic elements to tailor the experience. As you progress through the game, you can expect to personalize your vehicles, weapons, and gang. Additionally, as you play through missions and expand the Saints empire, your church headquarters also improves with cosmetic options and visual upgrades.

The cops may be off our tail, but they had a clear view of our vehicle, so we drive into the desert to swap to an anonymous getaway car Neenah stashed. Unfortunately, the junkyard is under the control of Los Panteros, and Neenah kept this operation a secret because they'd demand a high commission on the job. The gang found the car anyway and dismantled it, kicking off a gunfight when we arrive. With combat common in the streets of Santo Ileso, gunplay is a crucial element of the experience, and Volition delivers solid shooting mechanics. In the build of Saints Row I played, I had access to several weapons. While they're all effective in their own ways, I opt to blow up the machine-gun-mounted truck with my rocket launcher, then pump the others full of lead using my SMG.

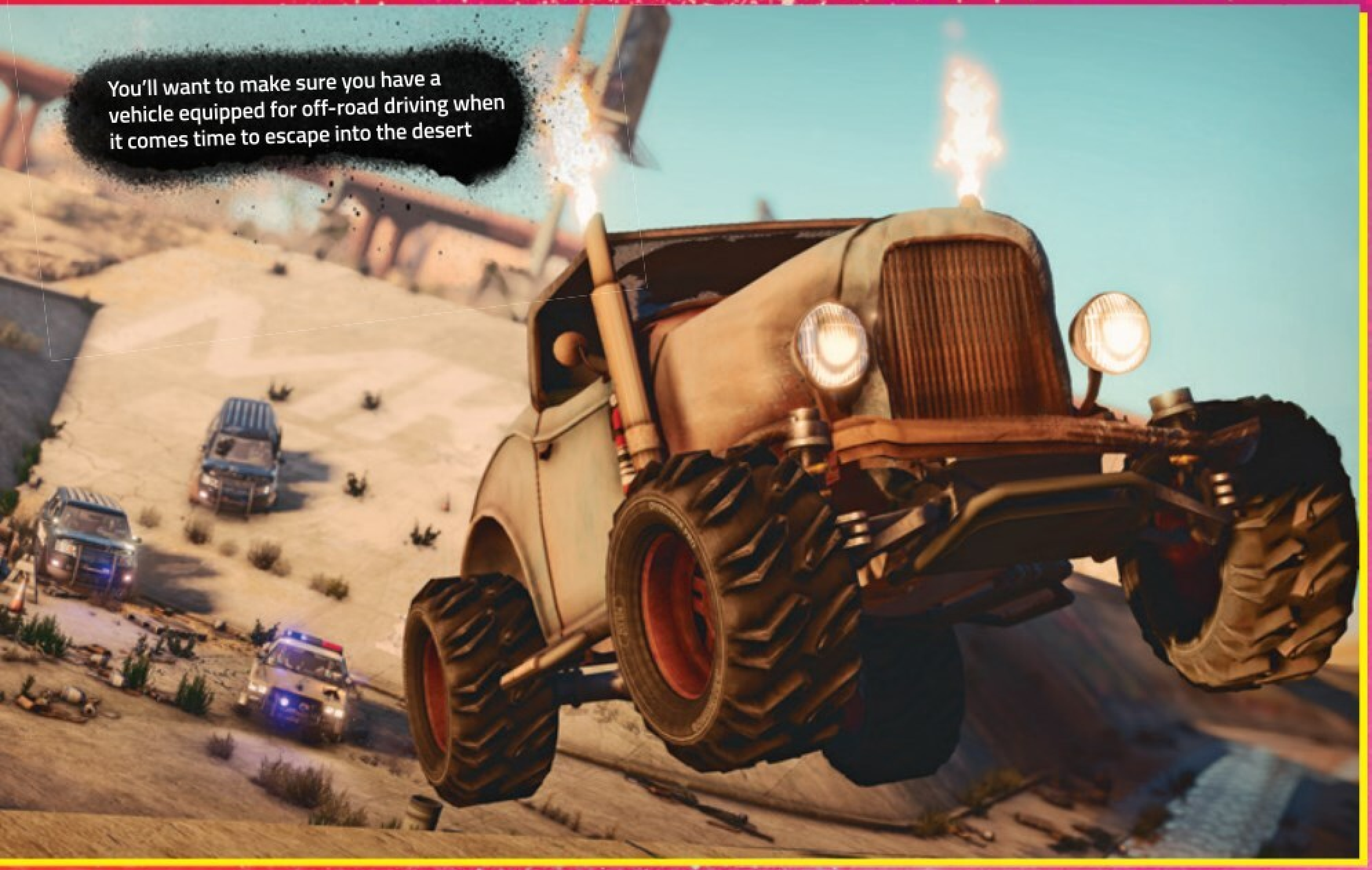
The rival gang members are dealt with, but the cops heard the fight and are en route. With the getaway car on cinder blocks and the original vehicle already identified by the police, Neenah and I hop on dirt bikes we find in the junkyard and escape to the desert. Sadly, this means karaoke is probably canceled. "Every f---ing time," Eli exclaims in frustration.

After an intense chase through the desert punctuated with a massive jump, we lose the cops, and the mission ends. I receive cash and experience points, which are used to unlock new skills, more health, and faster ability cooldowns. Those are good rewards, but perhaps the biggest takeaway from this operation is how well the team works together.

"They're not the Saints at that point, but they realize they're kind of good at what they're doing, and they should maybe seek to scale their ability to do some of these things," says executive producer Rob Loftus. "That's where [your character] starts to point out like, 'No guys, I think we can turn this into a bigger thing than just sticking up a Payday loan place.'"

The unlikely friends begin looking at each other as a family and eventually decide to form a group where they can grow their own criminal empire and make the riches they've only dreamt of to this point. Being the businessman that he is, Eli knows that any good enterprise needs office space, and Neenah knows of an abandoned church in the Mercado district the squad could use.

The church starts in a sorry state, but you can improve the HQ by raking in the dough. When the team first walks in, they notice fleur-de-lis symbols representing Catholic saints. The sign becomes a logo for the crew, and they adopt the name "The Saints." With your character serving as the spark for the crew, you've officially begun down the path to becoming "The Boss."



You'll want to make sure you have a vehicle equipped for off-road driving when it comes time to escape into the desert

TAKING WHAT'S YOURS

The newly christened Saints begin carrying out operations as an independent faction within the city. As you might imagine, the three gangs already in control of Santo Ileso don't take kindly to a new player showing up, let alone one consisting of former members of their gangs. This dynamic paves the way for conflicts to emerge around every corner. I was surprised by how different the encounters played out depending on who the enemies were.

"Our approach with the factions was to go a little bit further than we had in the past, where each of the factions was relatively similar in terms of their challenge rating and how you combat them," Traficante says. "From the ground up, these factions fight differently. They're all built to challenge you in a different way. With that, we wanted to make sure they were radically different."

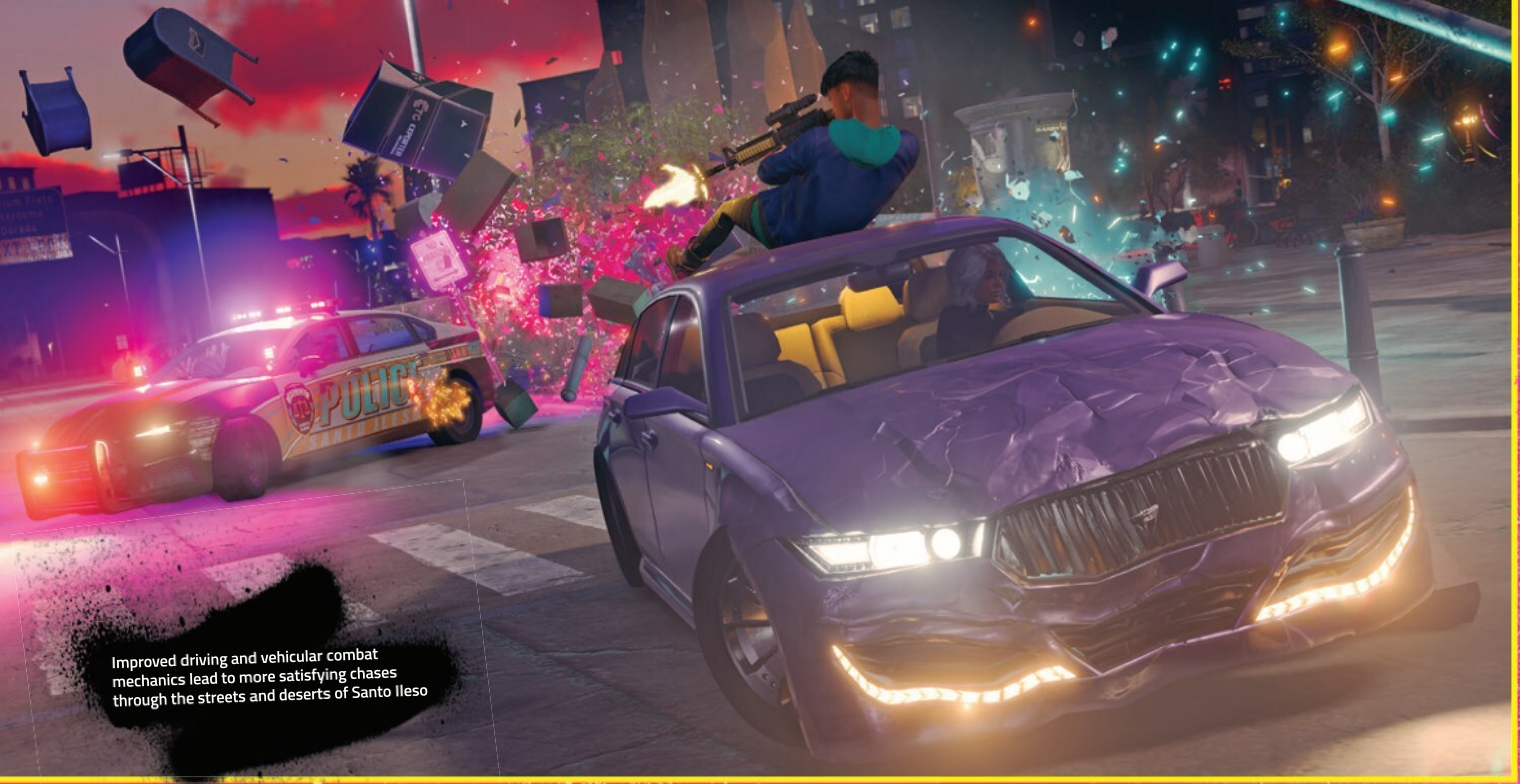
In keeping with that theme, the different factions possess different weapons, abilities, and even strategies in combat. Los Panteros is built around muscle, with imposing members who use powerful, short-range weapons and hard-hitting melee attacks. Their technology is limited, but they're formidable thanks to their members and how they use the equipment at their disposal.

On the other side of the coin is Marshall. This dominant, corporate faction uses its wealth to get ahead, funneling money into technology and training programs for its members. The members of Marshall know how to approach a battle strategically, and their advanced tools make them even more dangerous in a gunfight. Smokescreens, heat vision, and laser-sights are just the beginning. Marshall also has containment devices like laser lassos and enough high-tech tools to make Tony Stark proud.

While Los Panteros are physically strong and Marshall flexes its financial might, The Idols' strength comes in their numbers. Their dreams of shutting down the city and letting anarchy and chaos reign supreme has resonated with the masses, giving The Idols a seemingly endless, cult-like following. They don't typically have the most sophisticated weaponry, nor are they the best-trained fighters. Instead, The Idols use their fanatical followers to their advantage with swarm tactics meant to overwhelm enemies. Once you're in combat with The Idols, you know you're not getting off the hook after taking out just a few members.

If the second story mission I played is any indication, The Idols don't like it when one of their own jumps ship for another crew. "Idol Threat" takes place a bit later in the story and starts with a phone call with Kevin, who is about to head back to HQ. The plan is to binge telenovelas all night, but that's put on hold when The Idols ambush him before he can get in his car. When Kevin doesn't come home that night, The Boss and Eli assume he hooked up with a random person, but they decide to track him down the following morning anyway.

You can expect encounters to play out very differently depending on which enemy faction you're facing



Improved driving and vehicular combat mechanics lead to more satisfying chases through the streets and deserts of Santo Ileso

Using Kevin's cell phone signal, Eli tracks him to a nearby bar. The Boss calls Kevin, but a random guy picks up the phone and says Kevin is "tied up at the moment." The Boss assumes this is an example of TMI, but when they arrive at the bar and see Idol bikes and cars, they realize it's not the fun kind of tied up. The Boss walks into the Idol-filled bar and bashes one of their heads into the jukebox, kicking off a massive bar brawl. Melee combat is simple, often consisting of pulling the controller's trigger while in melee mode, but once the meter at the bottom of the screen fills up, you can perform a cinematic finisher, similar to some of the over-the-top moves we've seen in previous Saints Row games.

After the dust settles, I find Kevin's phone outside, but more Idols swarm the scrapyard around back. Aside from their firework grenades, there isn't much about these Idols I can't handle, so after wasting all of them with still no sign of Kevin, I find a surviving member in a port-a-potty. Using the game's new tethering mechanic, which lets you tow objects with your vehicle, The Boss kicks over the port-a-potty and drags the poor soul through a nearby Idols camp until the now-smelliest member of the faction spills the beans on their plan.

When The Idols kidnapped Kevin, they wanted to send a public message of what happens if you betray them, so they tied Kevin up under the big Santo Ileso sign and rigged it to explode. A countdown clock appears on my screen, so I detach the port-a-potty and make a beeline towards the landmark. In typical Idols fashion, their cars surround me, but I don't have time to slow down and deal with them.

Once I arrive, even more Idols try to get in my way, but I make quick work of them as I climb my way up the sign. Along the way, I disarm five explosives; it turns out The Boss' Marshall training came in handy. After stopping the plan, untying Kevin, and rescheduling the telenovela marathon, we decide to exact a little revenge of our own. The Santo Ileso sign acts as a great viewpoint of the city, and it just so happens to overlook an Idols house party that's raging in celebration of their grand plan.

Without any hesitation, The Boss leaps from the sign and opens their wingsuit. While driving is the primary mode of transportation, wingsuit flight might be the most efficient method. You can jump from high places,

CHALUPACABRA
CHALUPACABRA

but you can also use designated launchers throughout the world or wingsuit off the roofs of cars. You can even airdrop onto fast travel points and wingsuit in the direction you want to go instead of traditional on-foot fast travel.

This flight route is straightforward: Just follow the neon glow of the Idols party. I land (not so gracefully) and begin taking down the Idols as they run at me. Their attempts to overwhelm Kevin and me are fruitless, though as we finally deplete their numbers, some special enemy types with neon shields crash the party. These foes require a bit more strategy and persistence to take down, but after finishing them off, the mission ends. Not only do I get the standard cash and XP rewards, but the game gives me a port-a-potty trophy that I can use to decorate Saints HQ.

The mission may have been a success, but I have a feeling thwarting their plans and murdering their entire guest list didn't do much to deescalate conflict between the Saints and Idols. Tensions are high across the board, and not just because of the Saints. These factions may have the common goal of preventing the Saints from encroaching on their territory, but that doesn't mean they're setting their differences aside to accomplish it.

"If a situation happens and Idols end up in Los Panteros territory, and you're fighting with Los Panteros, The Idols don't always have to come after you," says lead producer Rojé Smith. "You almost see this three-way fight because if you think about it, Los Panteros don't have any love for Idols. Idols have no love for them. You're all in it for yourselves. If you come into another turf, it can't just be about aiming at the player. They'll fight each other. Also, if the cops show up, they want to take everybody out."

Santo Ileso may be a beautiful city full of diverse regions and unique sights to see, but with the Saints formed, rival factions hanging on to what's theirs, and the police on high alert, a desperate struggle to control the city commences.

GREETINGS FROM SCENIC SANTO ILESO!

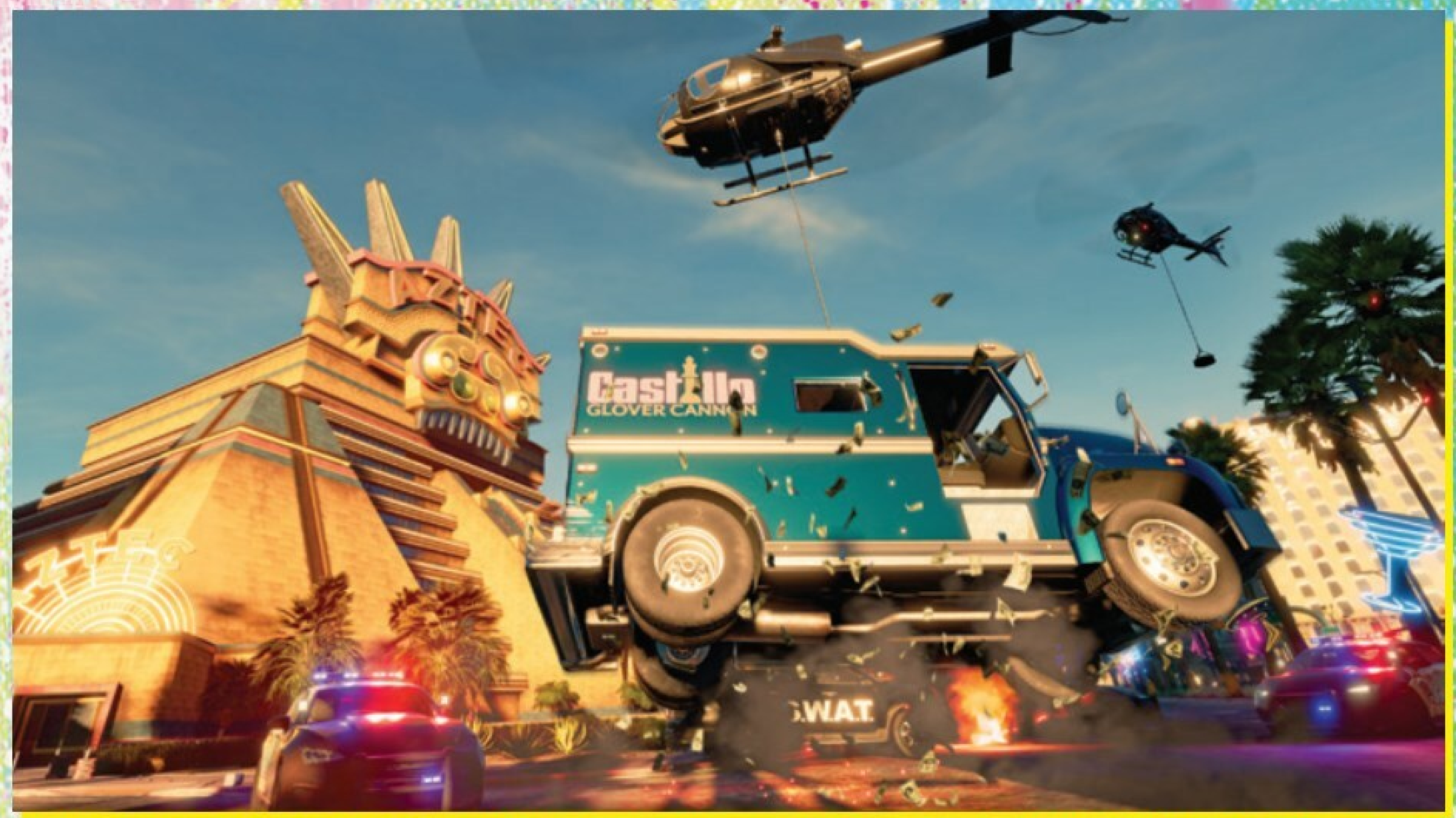
Previous Saints Row games took place in the fictional cities of Stilwater and Steelport, which drew inspirations from real-world locations like Chicago and Detroit. For this reboot, developer Volition wanted to branch out and create a wholly new setting. The result is Santo Ileso, an amalgamation of the American Southwest.

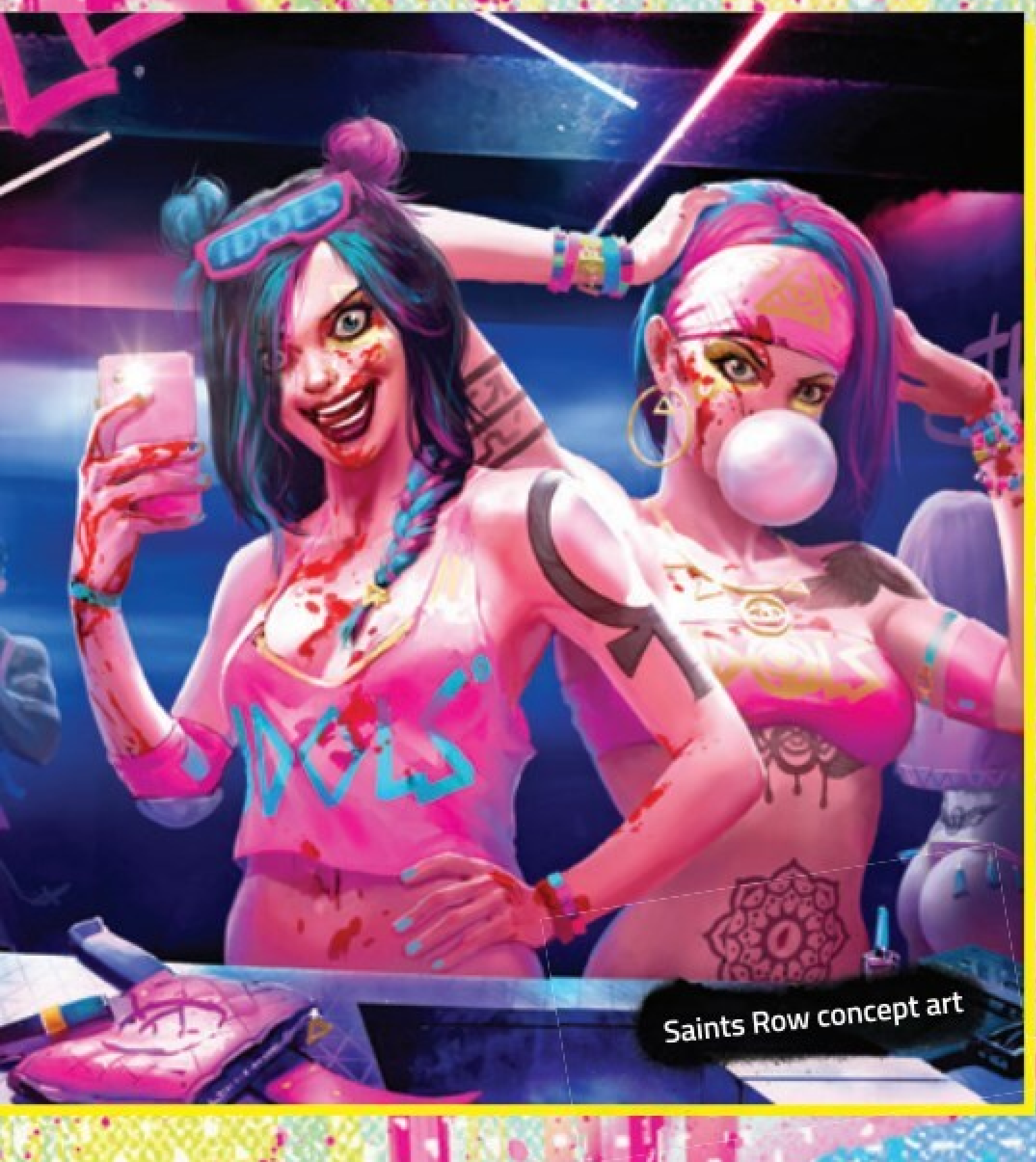
"We spent a lot of time figuring out what kind of area in the world we would do this in," Boone says. "We ultimately settled into the Southwest. We knew we wanted to do something that was more in that kind of region. … And the breadth of content was the vital thing that sets it for us because there's just so many different elements that you can draw upon stylistically in the Southwest that it just became this fun, creative challenge for us where we knew we wanted to have a lot of diversity in the setting."

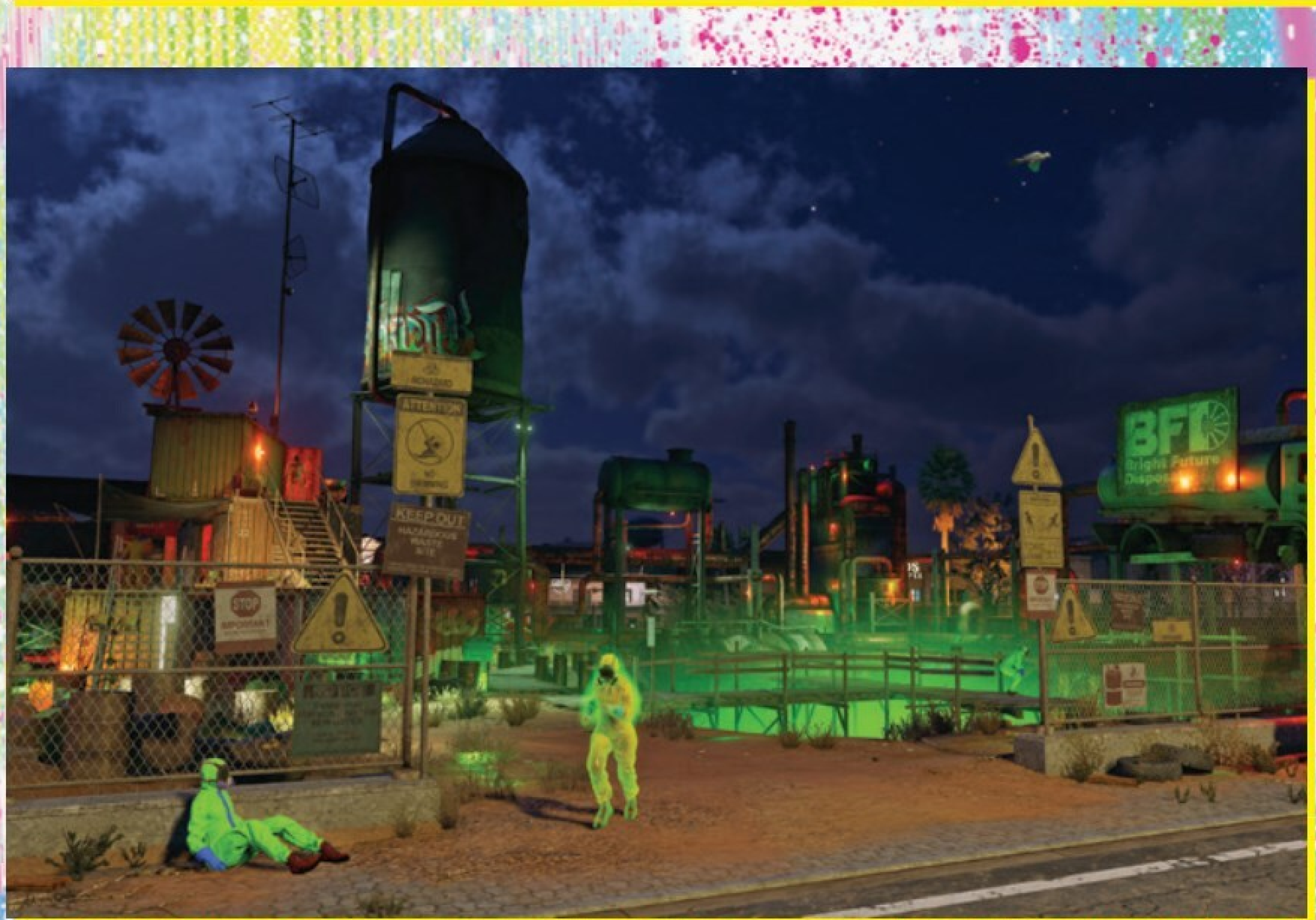
To establish the city within the game world and give it an authentic feel, the team at Volition created a massive history book of the fictional city dating back to the 1600s. "[It has] the entire history of, like Jesuit missionaries and what was happening during all the different wars that were taking place between America and Mexico," Campbell says. "So, whenever I'm like, 'Why is this building in this location?' they have a reason."

Santo Ileso consists of 11 distinct districts. From the retro glitz and glamor of the El Dorado casino district, the luxury shopping and housing district of Lakeshore, or the classic main street USA vibes of Old Town, Santo Ileso provides a varied taste of the Southwest themes for which Saints Row is aiming, with inspirations including Las Vegas, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico.

It's not all cityscapes, though. A significant part of replicating the Southwest is the desert. Two styles exist in Santo Ileso; on one side, you have the arid, badlands style complete with oil derricks and dustbowls, while the other shows the beautiful side, full of oases, lush plants, and gorgeous skyboxes.




Saints Row concept art



Whether you're out in the desert or the heart of the El Dorado district, side content is scattered throughout Santo Ileso, giving you a ton of activities to take part in when you're not pushing the main story forward. Simply driving around the city lets you do quick activities like snapping photos of tourist destinations with your phone or collecting errant drug palettes for the Saints' gain, but you can also complete Side Hustle missions. The two I played through are "Riding Shotgun" and "Pony Express." You go on a drug deal with someone in Riding Shotgun, but when your partner kills the dealer, you need to fend off pursuing vehicles while he makes a getaway. Meanwhile, Pony Express tasks you with hopping into an off-road vehicle and racing across the desert to deliver a package before the timer expires.

This content is certainly more bite-sized than the story missions I played, but they go a long way in giving you more to do within Santo Ileso and can give pretty great rewards – Pony Express let me keep the off-road vehicle I used. However, the most exciting optional content comes in Criminal Ventures, where you establish businesses as legitimate fronts for far-from-legitimate operations.

PUTTING ON A HAPPY FACE

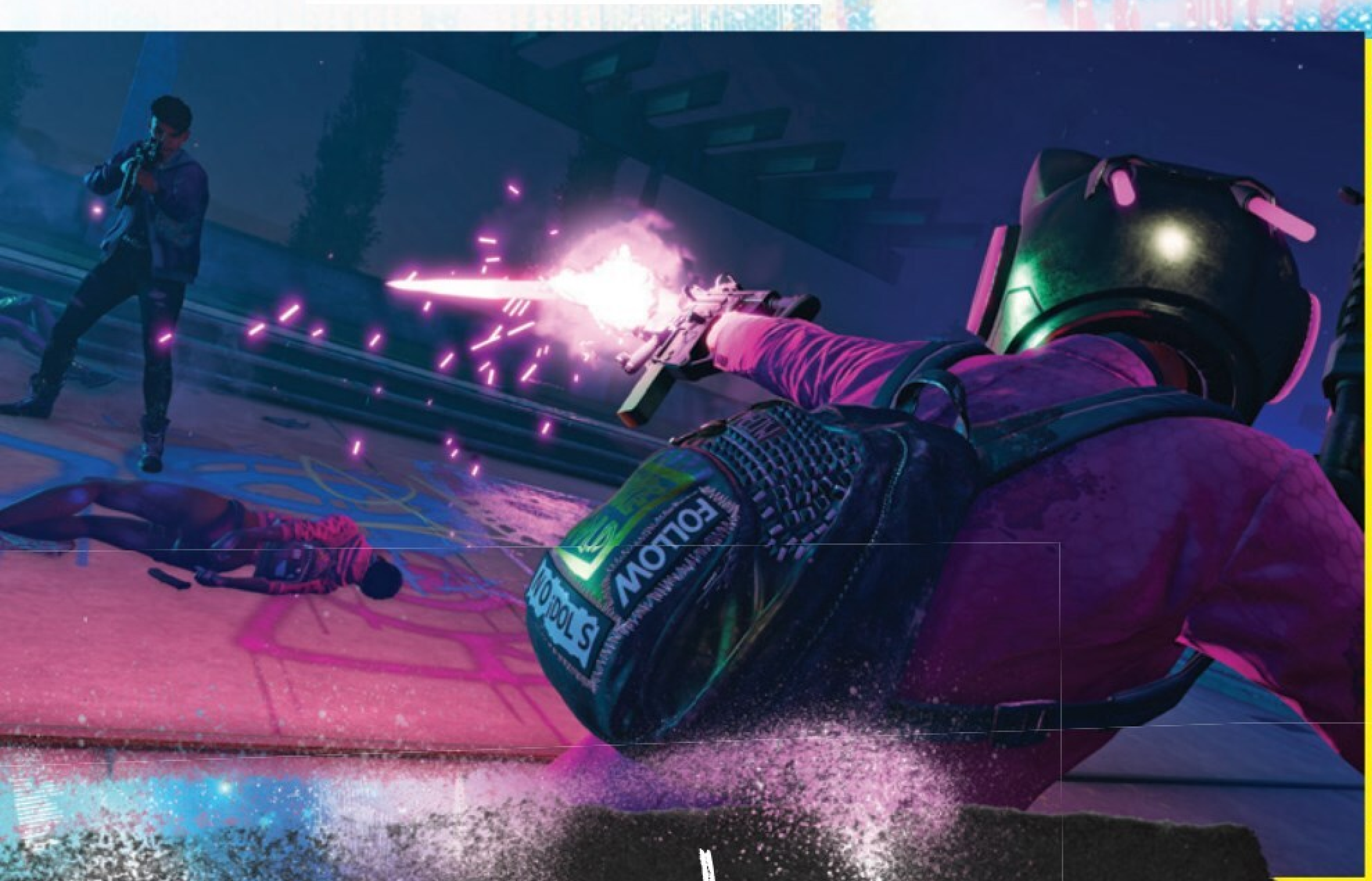
The Saints aren't above robbing a loan office at gunpoint or kicking down the door of a bar full of rival gang members to rescue one of their own, but if you're looking to build a criminal enterprise, sometimes you need a bit more finesse. That's where Saints Row's Criminal Ventures come into play. As the Saints look at growing their influence in Santo Ileso, they consider different schemes to expand their operation.

"We wanted to ensure that these activities fit within the narrative through-line of growing your empire and feed into our criminality theme," Traficante says. "You're not just opening up a business to sell retail; they're fronts for criminal activity. Each Venture is a different crime, which was really exciting to think about."

To select the Criminal Ventures for your gang to participate in, you access the Empire Map at Saints HQ. It might not look like much more than an old table with a tourism map sprawled out on it, but this is where you can plot the Saints' takeover of Santo Ileso.

Using the Empire Map, you select from 15 vacant lots from across the region. "There are specific areas where you can place a Criminal Venture that is going to affect Santo Ileso to be your own town; everyone's Santo Ileso is going to be a little bit different," says project manager Ray Hazlip. "We'll take the military surplus place [for example]. If you want that to be closer to the edge of the desert or if you want it to be closer to downtown, that's completely up to you. You can say, 'I've decided I want a military surplus thing next to the bougiest district in town,' because it's an obnoxious building to place. That is entirely up to you."

With the power in my hands, do I choose the spot in the heart of the El Dorado casino district, or do I set up shop in Lakeshore next to the museum? I decide on a vacant lot in the charming Mercado district right down the road from HQ. Once you select the plot of land, it's time to choose which front you want to establish for your criminal activities. I could pick the lucrative Bright Future scam, where you illegally dump toxic waste for corporations, but I feel like the Chalupacabra scheme might be a better fit for the location I selected.



Turn It Up!

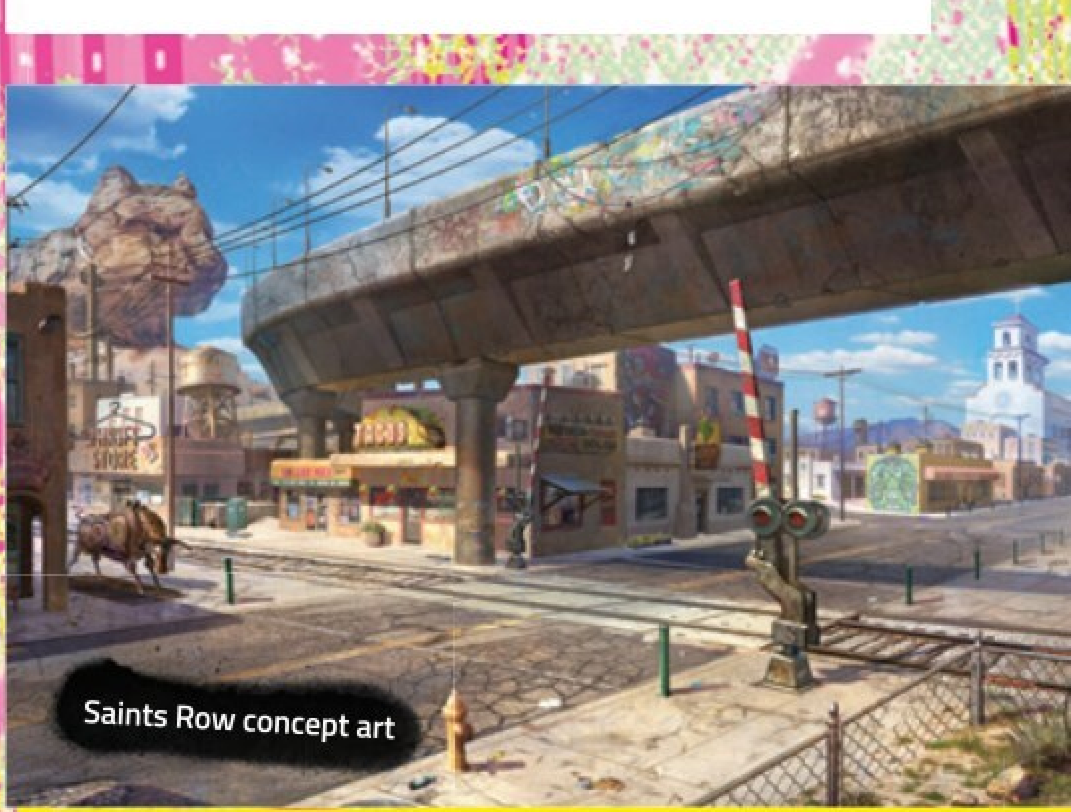
The city of Santo Ileso is built for driving, but while the audio team at Volition is proud of how the vehicles' engines sound, you probably want to listen to something on the radio while cruising down the streets. The licensed music isn't yet finalized, but the studio has a vision in mind for the tunes you'll be jamming to while on the road.

"We have an opportunity to try something new with things that are unique to a Southwestern setting that we haven't been able to do in the past," says senior audio designer Brandon Bray. "We wanted to make sure we've got at least a couple stations that you for sure wouldn't get in any other kind of environment. We've got a mariachi station, and we've got a Latinx club station, but we've also got some things that are a little bit more contemporary that fit that desert landscape."

For those who want other genres pumping through the stereo speakers, Bray also tells me there's a garage rock station that the studio loves to blast when driving through the desert. However, the favorite station around the studio is likely the retro synthwave station.

In between songs, players can also expect humorous ads to break up the music. I heard funny commercials for a pants store called "Cover Your Ass," a renovation company called "E3 Demo," and plenty more during my time driving.

These radios play every time you get into a vehicle, but if you opt to walk everywhere, Volition carries forward one of Saints Row IV's features: the ability to listen to the game's radio stations while you're on foot. Not only that, but you can create your own custom playlists from music in the game.



Saints Row concept art

The Saints aren't here to make friends with the other factions in Santo Ileso

In this Criminal Venture, the Saints establish themselves as players in the Santo Ileso food truck scene, but they're selling more than just street tacos. Several food trucks across the city have been operating as drug distributors, and the Saints have decided it's time to make their move. To do so, you must steal the dominant food trucks of Santo Ileso, convert them into your own, and then use them to earn extra income.

This isn't quite Los Pollos Hermanos from *Breaking Bad*, but Volition admits pop culture plays a role in creating missions. "Pop-culture inspirations definitely feature within Saints," Loftus says. "You could see some inspiration there with respect to the drug distributions."

After placing the taqueria, Neenah runs down the plan, which includes installing a guy named Chuy, who knows the drug distribution business inside and out – plus, according to Neenah, he makes a killer michelada.

Like Side Hustles, each Criminal Venture homes in on specific gameplay elements with several missions to complete in the chain. To steal the first food truck in that Venture, I need to fight through the waves of enemies protecting it, then deliver it safely back to the taqueria. In Bright Future, the other Criminal Venture available in my demo, I track down trucks housing toxic waste. I must then drive safely enough to get them back to the disposal site without them blowing up; the more waste barrels arrive intact, the more money I receive.

Criminal Ventures sometimes grant you rewards related to the activity you're engaging in. For example, I didn't get to play it, but one Criminal Venture that centers around illegal weapon development adds more experimental firepower to your arsenal and grants you access to a hoverboard.

The Criminal Ventures all offer unique gameplay elements, ranging from proving you know how to be effective with your weapons to even some wingsuit challenges, and the rewards might be just as unique. "There's a lot more impetus on players to complete the Criminal Ventures so that you get the actual rewards at the end of it," Hazlip says. "If you complete all of them, you start getting loaded with a bunch of different, wackier rewards."

This feature highlights one of the critical themes of the Saints Row series, which is expanding your empire through unlawful means. From what I played of this fun side content, it's stacking up to be among my most anticipated elements to dig into when Saints Row comes out next year.

THE BOSS IS BACK

The upcoming Saints Row may take the series in bold new directions, but there is no denying many of the trademark elements are firmly in place. Volition is walking a tightrope, retaining mainstay pieces of the puzzle while venturing into all-new territory. From what we've seen, played, and talked about, the studio has pulled off this precarious balancing act, effectively injecting new life into the tried-and-true formula of the franchise. The faces, setting, and enemies may be different, but based on my time with this new game, these are unmistakably the Saints we've known and loved for a decade and a half. ◆

For exclusive videos, interviews, and features about the upcoming reboot of the Saints Row franchise, head to our coverage hub at gameinformer.com/saintsrow

HORROR ON THE HORIZON

21 upcoming titles we're dying to get our hands on

BY JILL GRODT

There's a brief window after summer and before the holiday season where gaming likes to get a little spooky, and it's just getting started. Not only is there a multitude of scary games hitting this year, but there are even more projects looming in the distance to keep the frights going all year round. Keeping track of every ghostly adventure can be an intimidating endeavor, so we've rounded up a horde of them for you. You'll find games from varying genres and platforms, but each promises to keep you up at night – either from fear or because you can't stop playing.

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S
RELEASE: 2022

Striking Distance Studios may be new, but the development team working on The Callisto Protocol includes Dead Space and Call of Duty veterans. Because of this, the studio seems well placed to deliver on its promise that The Callisto Protocol will be a bar-setting, terror-filled action title. In it, you must break out of Black Iron Prison, one of the most inescapable security facilities in the year 2320, probably because it's located on Jupiter's moon Callisto. And the horrific monsters inside.

UNHOLY

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: 2022

Unholy's richly detailed, but twisted-looking, Last City holds the remnants of the human race. Unfortunately, it's a city riddled with plague, stalked by beasts, and burdened by fear. In this hellish metropolis, you play as Saidah, the mother of an abducted child. You choose how to go about your rescue mission, either sneaking your way past watchful eyes or permanently putting them out, but whatever blood-soaked path you take, your choices will weigh on your sanity.

FOREWARNED

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA (Currently in Early Access)

Dust off that tool kit and strap on a helmet because we are going digging in Egyptian ruins for treasure, and it's definitely, 100 percent going to go well. In Forewarned, you and up to three other fearless archaeologists are out to discover why several buildings begin to materialize in the desert on top of ancient Mejai burial sites. Your job is to locate an ancient artifact in each procedurally generated location, along with gathering lore and other trinkets, before whatever is lurking in the darkness finds you. For the extra brave among you, Forewarned also has a VR component that lets you experience Egypt's twisted tombs in a very real way.

REDFALL

PLATFORM: Xbox Series X/S, PC
RELEASE: 2022

Arkane's open-world co-op shooter is bringing you horror with attitude as a talented team of vampire hunters fights the forces of darkness. Trapped in Redfall, Mass., a group of survivors seeks to break through to the outside world. There are four powerful members of this merry band for you to choose from, each with their own unique abilities. The game offers players both single-player and multiplayer options, so you can hunt down vampires and their human followers with a group of three friends or go it alone. Either way, destroying these science-experiments-gone-wrong is your only way out.

EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
RELEASE: February

Fans of the Evil Dead franchise can look forward to some good, clean, horrific fun in the upcoming game adaptation. You can take control of several of the movies' well-known characters, including Ash Williams, Lord Arthur, Kelly Maxwell, and Pablo Simon Bolivar, to deal out gory death to the armies of darkness. Or you can also choose to inhabit a ghostly Kandarian demon to hunt down the heroes. Coming next year, Evil Dead: The Game includes both co-op and PvP modes that promise to capture the franchise's spirit.

THE OUTLAST TRIALS

PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: 2022

Are you ready to be a Cold War-era guinea pig for the Murkoff Corporation's mind-twisting experiments? If you said yes, then you're in luck! The Outlast Trials sets you in a decrepit hospital ward and tasks you with surviving a series of tests that developer Red Barrels calls "twisted, sadistic, and bizarre." And you don't have to go it alone. Though not all of you may make it out alive, you can attempt these terrifying trials with up to three friends. Do it for science!

MARTHA IS DEAD

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S,
PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: 2021

A word of warning: This psychological thriller delves into deeply unsettling subject matter. Martha Is Dead is not trying to trick you with jump scares or frighten you with monsters. Instead, it focuses on what horror does to us. Set in Tuscany during World War II, the contrast between the countryside's beauty and the ugliness of death is striking. You play Giulia, who finds her sister murdered. Amidst the war-torn land's harsh realities and the supernatural world, you seek to come to terms with your grief while uncovering what happened to Martha.

DYING LIGHT 2 STAY HUMAN

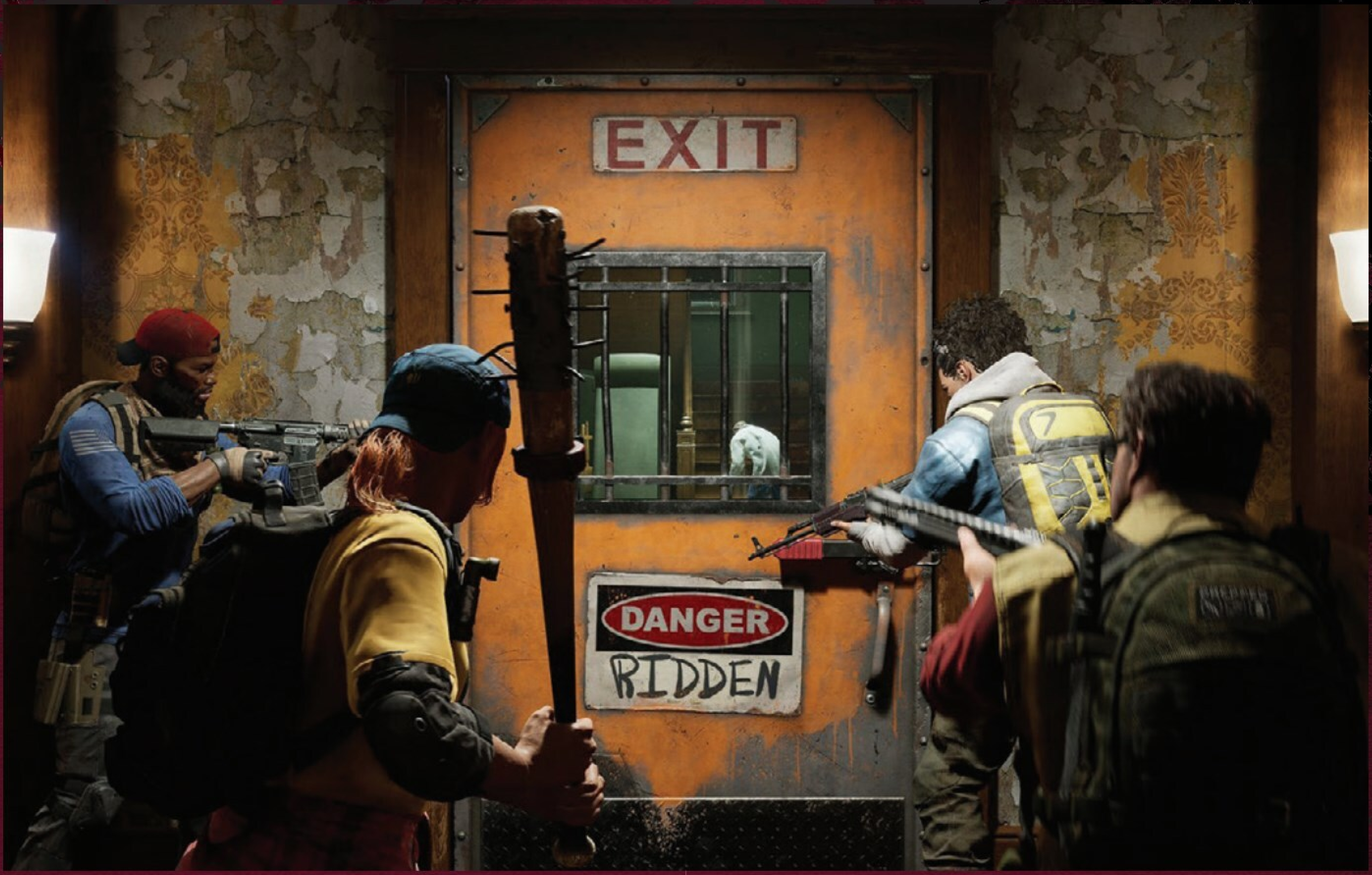
PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S,
PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC
RELEASE: February 4

If you're looking at a game with "Stay Human" in the title, it's a safe bet that it'll be good for Halloween. The City, a European urban sandbox, is not only larger than the first game's Harran, but it has more verticality to allow players to put their parkour skills to the test. Hopefully, those skills are up to the challenge because a horde of deadly zombies will be more than happy to tear you apart should you fall from your post-apocalyptic perch. You can read more about Dying Light 2 Stay Human on page 64.

SCORN

PLATFORM: Xbox Series X/S, PC
RELEASE: 2021

Alone and unsure where you are, you move through a maze-like complex where even the environment's design seeks to unnerve you. If things weren't bad enough, your limited ammo is beginning to run low. Scorn throws the player into an unfamiliar and disturbing world with interconnected regions, each with its own story and challenges. Solving puzzles and finding your way through the levels, you discover strange weapons, new skills, and essential items that help you unravel the world's mysteries. This one looks like it will require a strong stomach.



BACK 4 BLOOD

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: October 12

Turtle Rock Studios' new first-person cooperative shooter builds upon the team's previous work in Left 4 Dead. You play as one of eight customizable Cleaners, a group formed for the singular purpose of destroying the game's zombie-like Ridden. The deadly creatures take on various gruesome forms, and each presents a unique challenge. The lumbering, tumor-covered Reeker bursts open when killed, covering fighters nearby in gooey pus. Meanwhile, the sneaky Stinger attacks prey from the shadows. Luckily, players have many tools to fight the Ridden. As well as a selection of powerful guns, players also have cards that grant Cleaners special boosts and abilities.

Though similar in name and concept, Back 4 Blood is not technically related to the studio's earlier game series. When Turtle Rock broke away from Valve to become an independent developer, it left the rights to Left 4 Dead with the publisher. According to Back 4 Blood creative director Phil Robb, who recently talked to *Game Informer* about the upcoming project, the team chose the name deliberately. Back 4 Blood nods to the developer's original game and heads off the unavoidable comparisons between the two titles. But Robb also explains that it reflects the studio's feelings about coming back to the genre, that like their protagonists, the studio is back for blood. Whether in the 4-player campaign co-op missions or the 8-player PvP mode, players will find themselves entangled in the battle between human and abomination.

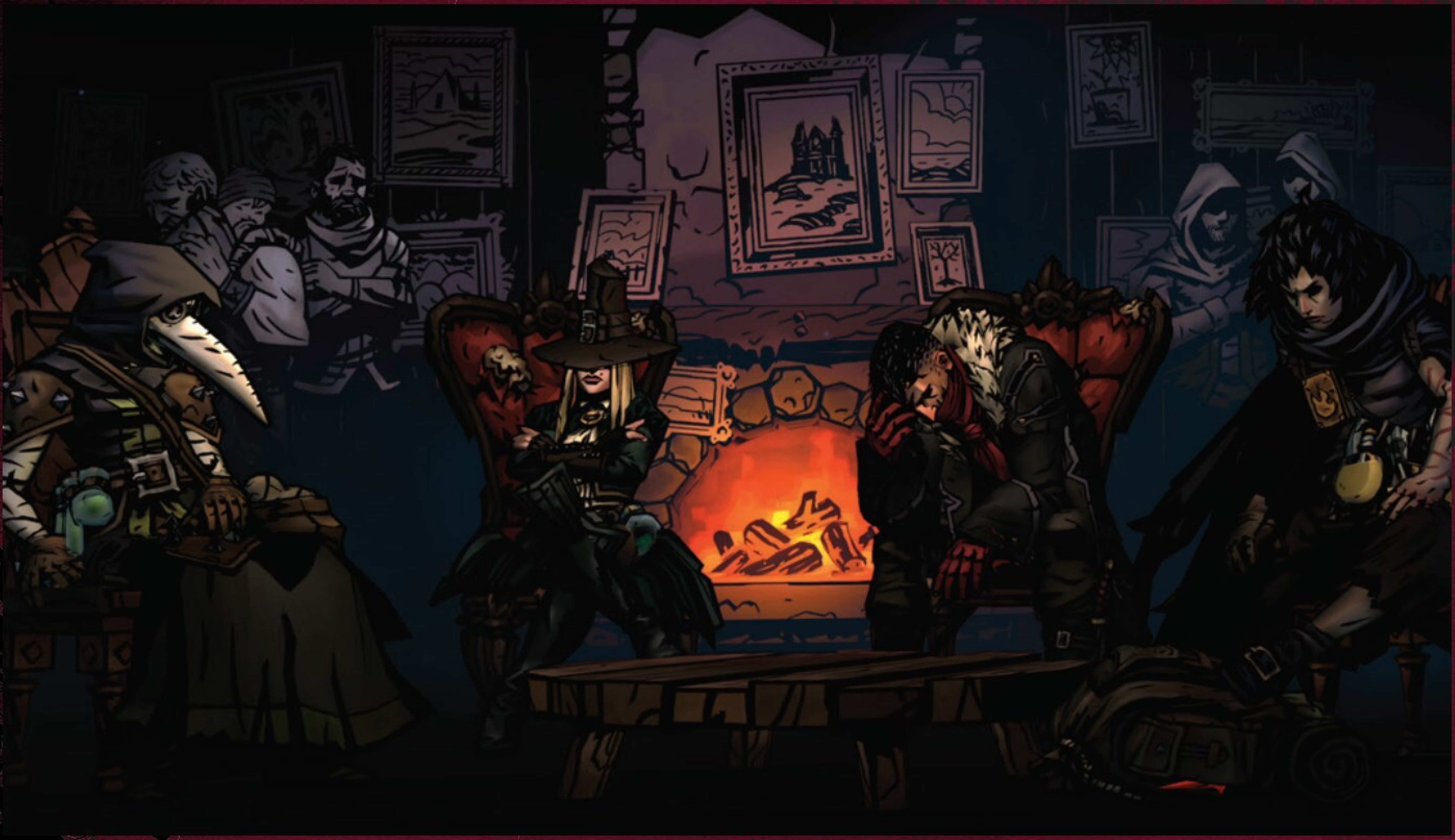
DARKEST DUNGEON 2

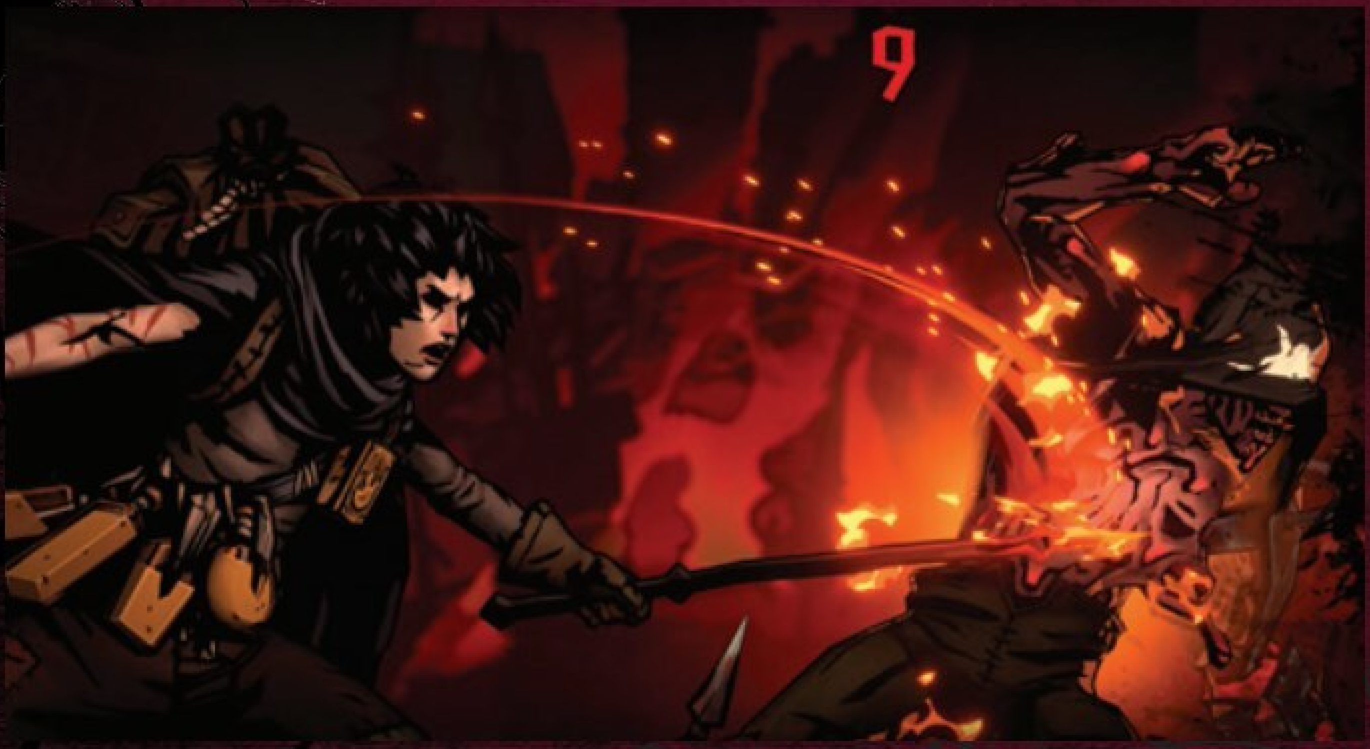
PLATFORM: PC
RELEASE: TBA (Epic Early Access October 26)

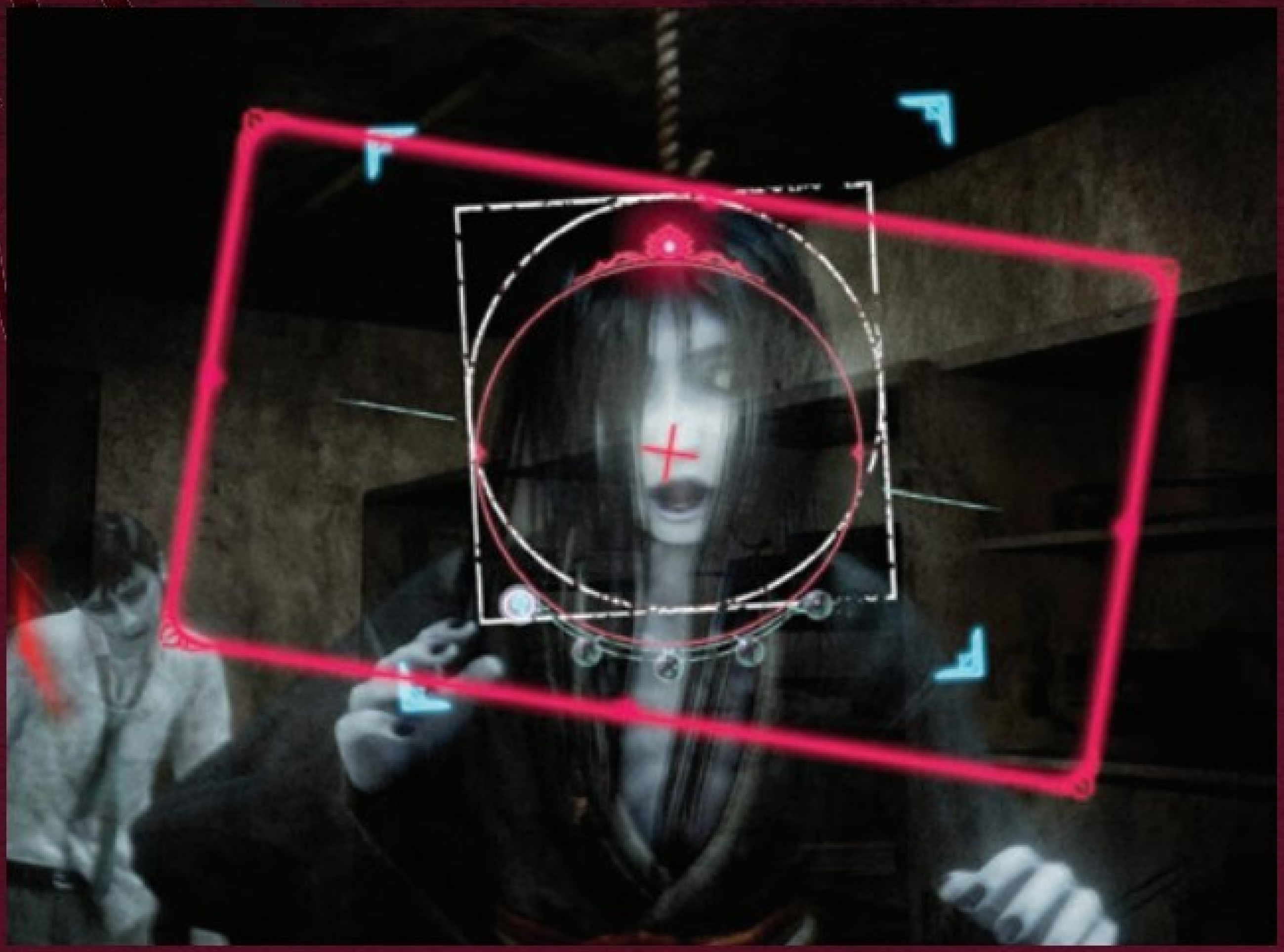
Darkest Dungeon 2 might be moving out of the depths of Hell, but that doesn't mean the sequel to the sanity-testing title will be any less unsettling. The ruin of your family now covers the world. With society breaking down into chaos, cities transform into death traps, and the countryside hides untold horrors. This bleak world is the landscape you and your band of travelers must traverse. But not everything is new; the familiar threat of permanent death and psychological trauma still looms behind every decision in the upcoming sequel.

Speaking to *Game Informer* recently, Red Hook Studios revealed a brand new hero for their next adventure. The Runaway is a fresh character with which fans can fill their roster. As an "extension of the game fiction as a whole," according to creative director Chris Bourassa, the Runaway has combat abilities related to fire. In a narrative where the world is figuratively, and in some cases literally, on fire, a new party member that can dish out some serious burn damage makes a lot of sense.

While this new character gives fans a lot to be excited about, the game's creators aren't stopping at one new hero. Design director Tyler Sigman said that the Runaway would be available in Early Access but adds, "it's not like we have decided only to make one new one, period." We don't know what those new heroes will look like or how many there will be, but Darkest Dungeon 2 is sure to have an expanded cast of characters when it finally comes out. Though the official launch date hasn't been decided yet, a recent update filled us in on when the game will come to the Epic Games Store's Early Access. Anyone interested in jumping into Darkest Dungeon 2 before its full release can check the game out on October 26.







FATAL FRAME: MAIDEN OF BLACK WATER

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, Switch, PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: October 28

A ghost is near. Your heart races, you begin to see your breath in the rapidly cooling air, and you have nothing but a camera to protect you. This is the premise of the chilling Fatal Frame series. The Maiden of Black Water, the fifth main entry, initially released on the Wii U, is getting a remaster for current consoles. The game sets you on a mission to Hikami Mountain, a place from which most people don't return. But we are sure you'll do great; just don't run out of film for your spirit-fighting device.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE BLOODLINES 2

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: TBA

Congratulations – or condolences – are in order! You're a vampire. You won't be able to sunbathe anymore, but there was never much of that in Seattle. Unfortunately, your transformation didn't start under the best of circumstances. Aside from getting used to a whole new afterlife, you must contend with several tense factions that are not pleased about the attack that made you a creature of the night. Vampires – you discover – have strict rules about hiding their existence from humanity, and your maker broke them.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN ROSWELL

PLATFORM: PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: 2021

The year is 1947, and seemingly without a trace, the entire Peterson family of Roswell, New Mexico, has gone missing. As you investigate their disappearance, this first-person, psychological horror game will confront you with scenes of war and terrifying, otherworldly possibilities. Rumors plague the town, but being the pragmatic detective you are, you dismiss the wild stories on the radio about extraterrestrials. But that doesn't mean they don't trouble you.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL

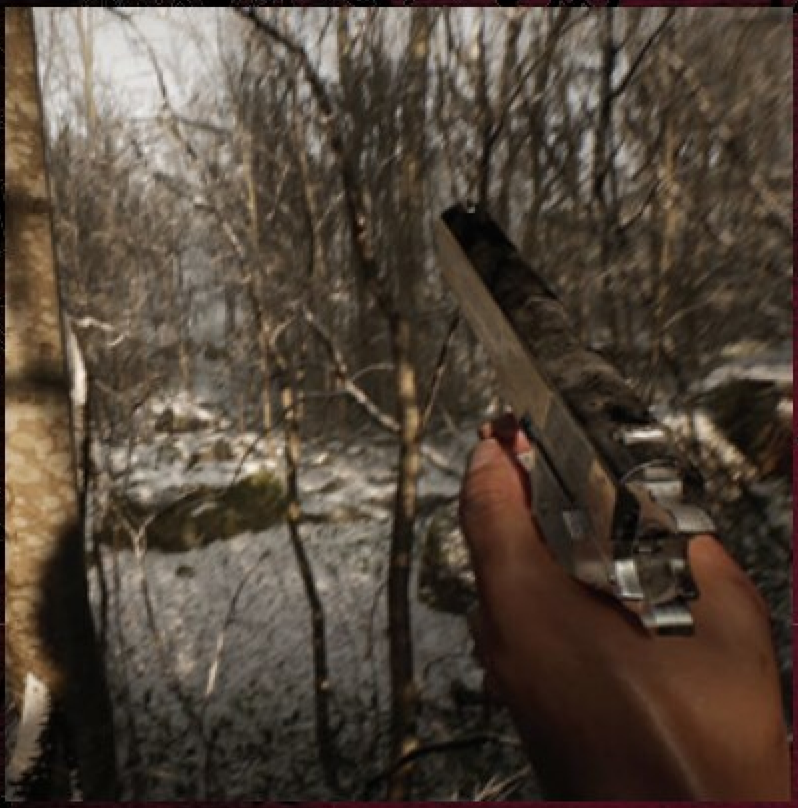
PLATFORM: Xbox Series X/S, PC
RELEASE: April 28

Nearly a decade after the game's initial launch date, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2 is coming out next year. The latest trailer for the fourth game in the series features a group gathered around a campfire. It seems almost cozy until it cuts to The Zone. A place of anomalies and dangers, The Zone is where, in this tale of alternate history, the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant explosion took place. For a brave few, this unnatural area is a source of enriching artifacts. But to get them, you have to brave the mutated entities and hostile forces of it.

SONS OF THE FOREST

PLATFORM: TBA
RELEASE: TBA

You thought you got out, didn't you? We entered the forest entirely unwillingly in the first game after a dramatic plane crash into the wilderness. Dazed and worried about his now-missing son, the protagonist, Eric, pulls together a makeshift shelter as hungry eyes watch from beyond the trees. The spookiest thing we know about The Forest's sequel so far is how quiet the development team has been. There has been little news about Sons of the Forest since its last trailer in 2020, but it looks as beautiful as it does creepy.



ABANDONED

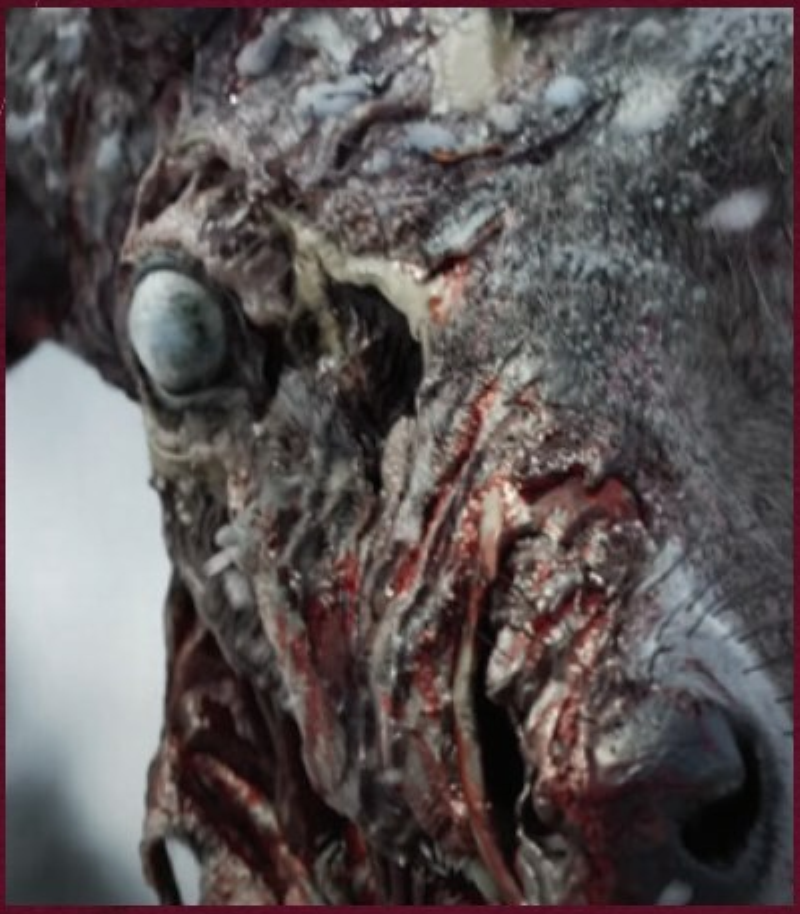
PLATFORM: PS5
RELEASE: 2022

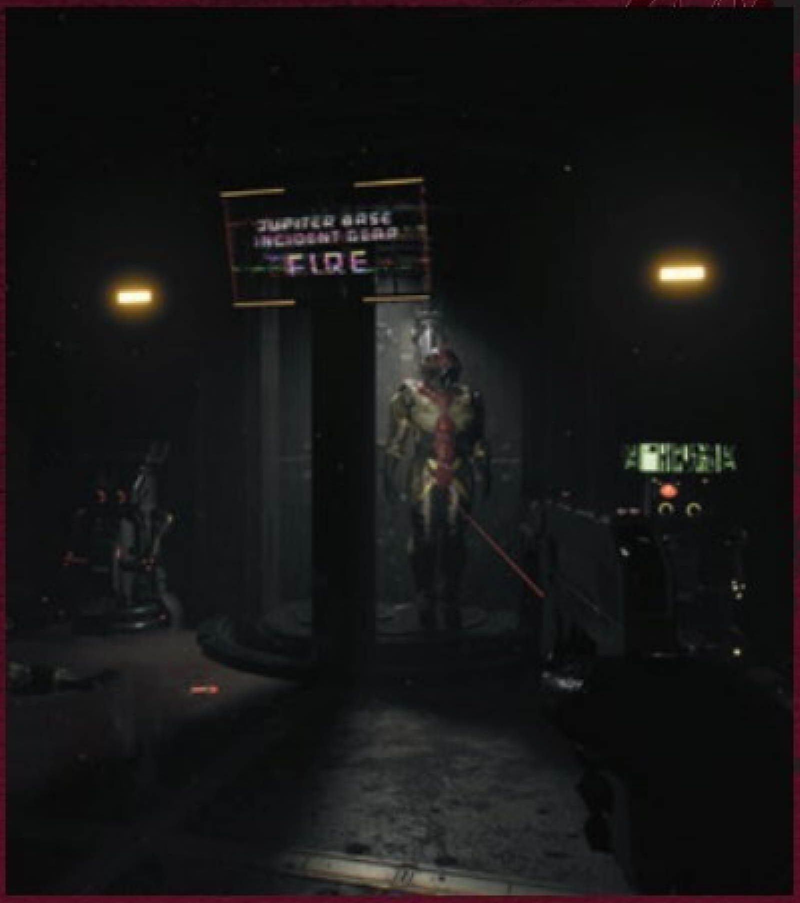
This hyper-realistic survival horror might be better known for its Kojima-related fan theories than its gameplay, but from what the developer has shown, Abandoned looks like a chilling experience. You play as Jason Longfield, who wakes up in the woods unable to remember how he got there. Unfortunately for him, his abduction seems to have something to do with a cult that isn't eager to return him to safety. Trying to escape his deadly surroundings will be difficult with no food and no way to call for help.

STATE OF DECAY 3

PLATFORM: Xbox Series X/S, PC
RELEASE: 2022

A lot of games have zombie humans, but they don't all have disturbing zombie deer. Of course, State of Decay 3 will have plenty of humanoid monsters for your community to contend with as well. The game focuses less on killing and more on surviving as you work to build up your settlement and gather resources for the survivors living there. But in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-infested landscape, that isn't always an easy task.

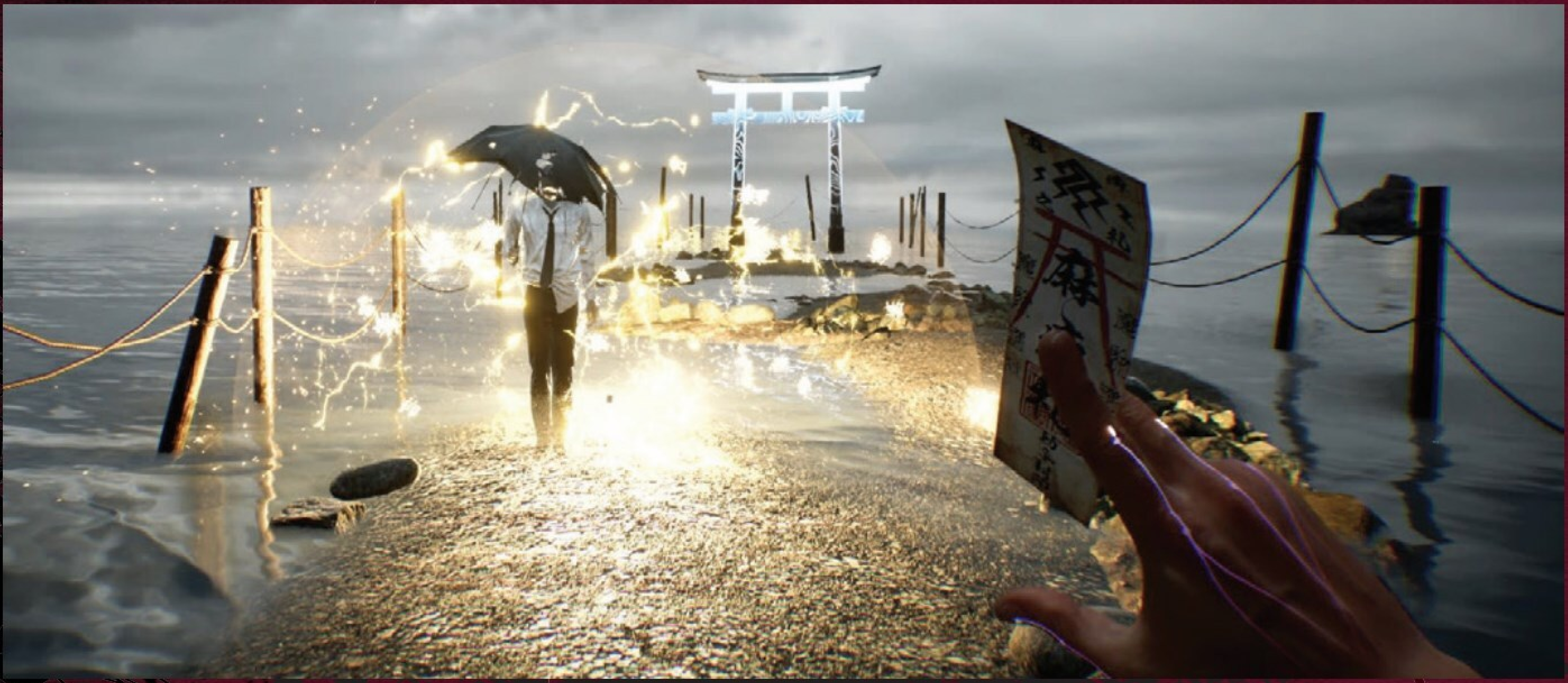




QUANTUM ERROR

PLATFORM: PS5,
Xbox Series X/S, PS4
RELEASE: TBA

You and your fire-fighting crew are sent to battle a blaze at the Monad Quantum Research Facility off the coast of California. But, since Quantum Error is a cosmic horror first-person shooter, the situation goes downhill fast. It appears some things trapped in the complex would be better off burning. Your character, Capt. Jacob Thomas, doesn't know this, however, and is walking right into the madness.



GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

PLATFORM: PS5, PC
RELEASE: 2022

A fog spreads across Shibuya, swallowing unsuspecting people as it goes. A figure wearing a Hannya mask emerges, ready to lead a throng of evil spirits into a new era. Seemingly immune to whatever is happening, you are the only one who can stop it. You face a variety of disturbing, ghostly foes, including a headless schoolgirl and a creature resembling Slenderman, but with your newfound powers, you might just succeed. Can you save Tokyo from the dark forces invading it and rescue the ones you love?

THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY: HOUSE OF ASHES

PLATFORM: PS5, Xbox Series X/S, PS4, Xbox One, PC
RELEASE: October 22

Disturbing ancient ruins sealed off from the world for hundreds of years is never a good idea. Unfortunately for the characters in the latest installment of the Dark Pictures Anthology, House of Ashes, that's exactly what they manage to do while looking for weapons of mass destruction. The military unit may not have found what it was looking for, but there is definitely something deadly in this underground temple complex.

Set in 2003 during the Iraq War, the game begins with opposing military forces squaring off against each other when an unexpected shockwave opens the earth beneath their feet. Several soldiers from both sides inadvertently fall into a Sumerian structure buried beneath the sands. The characters get trapped alongside people they were just attacking with no way to communicate with the outside world. Tensions are understandably high, and it's here that the player begins to guide the survivors through a series of pressure-filled choices. The decisions only get more intense and the danger more extreme as time goes on and a new threat emerges. There is something in the dark recesses of this place – an old and deadly creature – stalking the group.

House of Ashes is the third entry in Supermassive Games survival-horror franchise. The maker of Until Dawn plans to develop eight games in total, leaving five more titles to look for in the future. Like all the other games in the franchise, House of Ashes' story doesn't directly connect to any other installment that came before, but it will follow the same branching narrative formula. ◈

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl

Making Sinnoh sing

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing (2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
ILCA

» Release
November 19

When Pokémon migrated to Nintendo Switch from the 3DS, the first taste we received was Pokémon Let's Go, Pikachu & Eevee. These remakes of the Gen 1 games simply scratched the surface of what Game Freak and the Pokémon franchise hoped to accomplish in harnessing the new power of Nintendo's hybrid system. Unfortunately, the Let's Go games were divisive for the changes they made to the core mechanics. In contrast, the second batch of Switch remakes, which focus on the fourth-generation games, look to remain more faithful to the established formula.

Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl take the Gen 4 titles players were first introduced to in 2007 and reimagines them with modern visuals and additional mechanics. Before 2022's Pokémon Legends: Arceus takes us to a bygone era, Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl allow you to experience the mainline story of the modern-day Sinnoh region.

As with the original games, Professor Rowan gives you a choice between the grass-type Turtwig, fire-type Chimchar, and water-type Piplup. With your partner Pokémon, you travel the region collecting more monsters, battling other trainers, and collecting gym badges. The ultimate goal is filling your Pokédex, foiling Team Galactic's plans, and defeating the Elite Four to become the Pokémon League champion.

Pretty much anyone who has played a Pokémon game will recognize that formula; the flow of the game remains largely intact for the series' mainline entries as recently as Sword & Shield. Throughout the region, the routes and towns are faithfully recreated and preserved from the games' original DS releases. Experienced players who remember Diamond & Pearl fondly will recognize all the familiar sights and sounds of Sinnoh.

Just like in the original games, you can deck out your Poké Balls with stickers you collect throughout your journey. These stickers make the ball look distinct while also granting special effects like fireworks or confetti when Pokémon pop out. You can utilize the 2D customization tools of the original Diamond & Pearl or access the modernized 3D version of the editor to place up to 20 stickers on each capsule.

The Union Room, where trainers can challenge each other in online and local communication battles, makes a return, and you can access it from anywhere in Sinnoh with a press of the Y button. Here, players can assemble to battle and trade their captured creatures. The official website also lists "other activities" as an option in both local and global rooms, but currently, we don't know what that entails.

Super Contest Shows are also back, letting trainers enter their Pokémon to be judged on cuteness, cleverness, coolness, beauty, or toughness. Each category features normal, great, ultra, and master ranks to which Pokémon can aspire. In these shows, Pokémon are scored based on three categories: visual, dance, and move. The visual evaluation considers the Pokémon's conditions as well as any effects granted by their Poké Ball decorations. The dance assessment presents you with a simple rhythm minigame to earn extra hype points. Finally, the move evaluation awards points based on your timing in executing a move during the dance sequence.

Despite the desire to remain faithful to the original Pokémon Diamond & Pearl games, developer ILCA takes liberties beyond the modernized visuals. You're able to choose from eight trainer photos to represent your base avatar, but through the Metronome

Style Shop in Veilstone City, you can further express yourself through your trainer. In the trailer, it looks like you can't customize as deeply as in Sword & Shield, but instead can swap your trainer's entire outfits; we get glimpses of outfits featuring Gengar and Eevee themes, plus others like Cyber Style, Winter Style, and Leather Jacket Style.

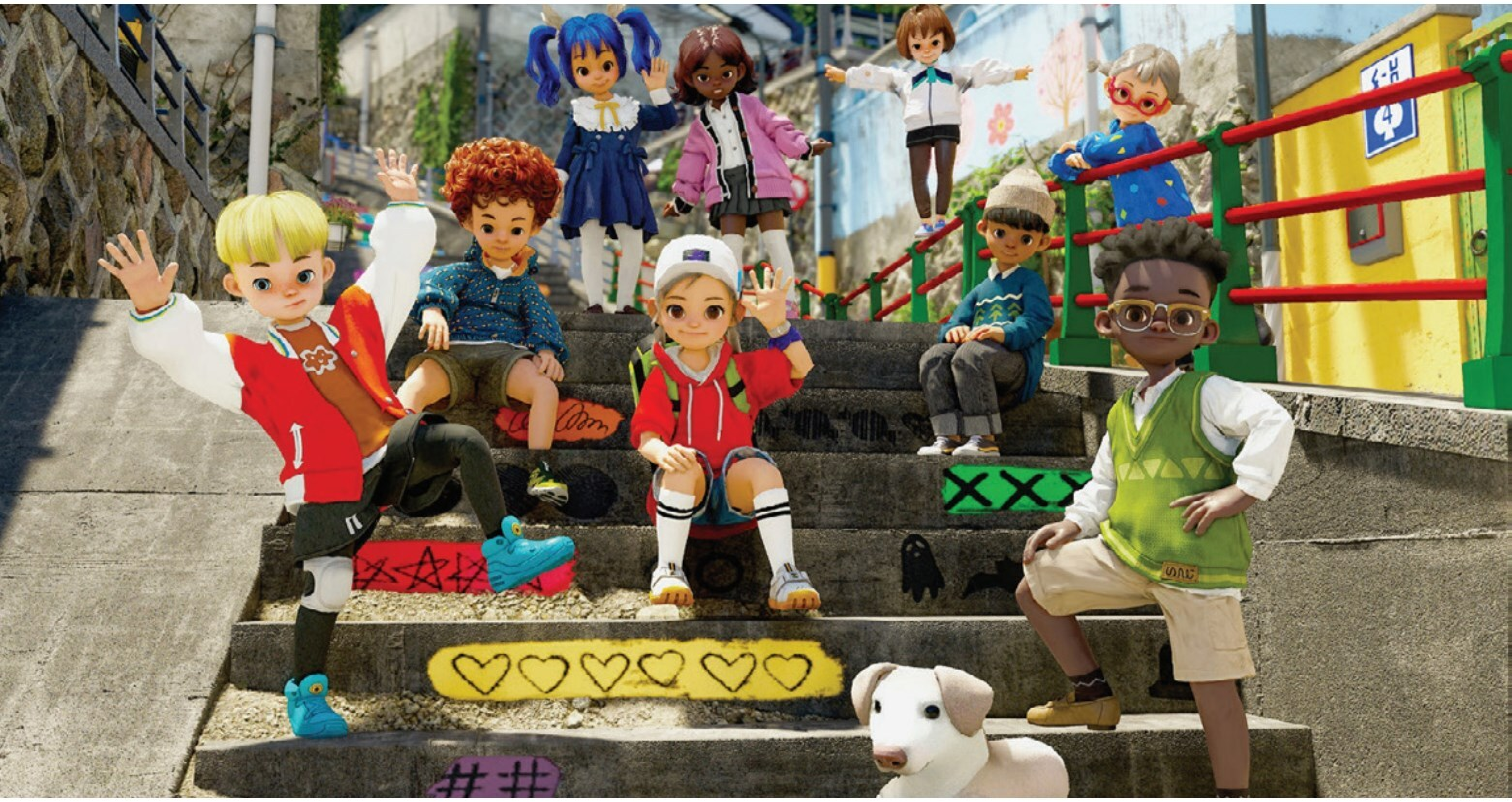
Additionally, the Underground from the original games receives a massive boost. Now known as the Grand Underground, the subterranean network of tunnels spans the entirety of the Sinnoh region in Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl. In this expanded version, players can complete fossil-digging minigames, interact with other trainers online, scrounge for treasure, and even customize their very own secret base with statues. The Grand Underground also features all-new Pokémon Hideaways, which house wild creatures living in different biomes – some Pokémon dwell only in these special areas. On top of that, the Pokémon that appear in the Hideaways change depending on which statues you have in your secret base.

If you grow especially attached to one of your Pokémon and want to experience Sinnoh together, these remakes have you covered. Taking a page from select games in the series and the anime, once you reach a specific point in Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl, you can choose a Pokémon to follow you as you explore. In addition, the games will become compatible with Pokémon Home in 2022, allowing you to transfer your creatures between games.

With fans eagerly awaiting Pokémon Legends: Arceus in January, Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl give players an excellent excuse to visit Sinnoh's present before traveling to the region's past. These remakes look to give longtime Gen 4 fans the loyalty and nostalgia they crave while making the 15-year-old games far more approachable and modern for newcomers. Pokémon Brilliant Diamond & Shining Pearl look like a great example of how to revitalize classic games from yesteryear. » **Brian Shea**

DokeV

A delightful fever dream of monster-catching, stylish action, and K-pop



» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC

» **Style**
Online Action

» **Publisher**
Pearl Abyss

» **Developer**
Pearl Abyss

» **Release**
TBA

DokeV emerged as arguably the biggest head-turner at this year's Gamescom. Though announced a year prior, its latest showing was the first time many had seen the sensory overloading open-world title from Black Desert Online developer Pearl Abyss. Questions arose amidst that excitement. Is Doke V also an MMO? What's with all of those wacky-looking monsters? How many possible ways can you get around its colorful world? Pearl Abyss has dispelled some of the confusion, but there's no question that DokeV looks like a wild time.

Though it began life as an MMO, Pearl Abyss said development changed gears and that DokeV is now a traditional open-world action/RPG. It all starts with creatures known as Dokebi, a type of spirit in Korean folklore. They have the ability to make people's dreams come true by filling humans with inspiration and courage. Dokebi can also get into mischief. Story specifics remain vague, but Pearl Abyss says collecting and befriending Dokebi while helping strangers with their problems forms the crux of the adventure. Dokebi take many bizarre forms, ranging from an attitudinal, hip hop-themed alarm clock to a panda wearing boxing gloves to a bright pink aardvark-like creature wearing a bib.

To catch a Dokebi, you first have to find hints of its existence by exploring the busy towns and vibrant open world. Gathering enough intel triggers special quests causing a specific Dokebi to appear. Once it does, you need to wear it down in battle. The colorful and chaotic combat incorporates the fast-paced action of Black Desert Online but is decidedly goofier. Instead of swords and shields, you fire water guns, swing oversized hammers, and hop on giant bouncy balls. Of course, the Dokebi you've already befriended will join in the fray as well. Once you weaken your target, you deploy a Ghostbusters-style trap to vacuum it and make it yours. In videos, combat looks outrageous with a showering of sparkle effects, confetti, and various transformations running amok at once.

DokeV's vibrant, toy-like open world looks fantastic and houses quest-giving NPCs and other activities to keep you busy. Traversal plays a major role with numerous options for getting around. Players can drive mini cars, cruise on rocket-powered skateboards, ride jet skis, soar on gliders, and even swing across the sky Spider-Man style. You can also mount certain Dokebi, such as an adorable llama-esque creature. Pearl Abyss aims to make acquiring these transportation options as rewarding as using them, and we can't wait to employ every method of movement (that isn't walking) as possible.

With DokeV, Pearl Abyss wants to make a family-friendly adventure anyone can enjoy, which still retains the depth and excitement of its previous work. Unfortunately, the team alluded that 2023 may be the earliest we'll get to hang out with its charming Dokebi. Everything about DokeV almost looks too good to be true, but if Pearl Abyss nails its ambitious scope, then it might have one heck of a surprise hit on its hands.

» **Marcus Stewart**

Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy

Holding out for a hero

If you read our early coverage surrounding Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy, you know our first look at gameplay featured the team of space misfits trying to dupe Lady Hellbender into giving them enough credits to pay a fine. That demo ended as the team entered her stronghold; now, our first hands-on session picks up right after they leave it.

While I don't know exactly what happened within the walls of her fortress, the team escaped and now have a llama with them. Star-Lord, who you control in this single-player adventure, charts the group's course to Nova Corps' station so they can pay their fine and get back in their good graces. But before embarking, I catch up with the other Guardians aboard the *Milano*. After chatting with Drax, I walk in on Gamora browsing for dolls she collects in secret and Rocket discretely using Peter's toothbrush to clean his tools.

Once the team arrives, they notice the station is abandoned. After scanning the deserted lobby with Star-Lord's visor, I use the squad commands to tell Rocket to crawl through the vents and instruct him on how to reroute the power so the team can progress. Later, I use Star-Lord's ice ammo to freeze a door open. These puzzles are simple but left me intrigued at how they might expand later.

As they walk through the station, the Guardians bicker the entire time, lobbing insults and comebacks. Sometimes, you can even respond. Though the path through the narrative is linear, decisions you make with your fellow Guardians and other characters impact the story as you progress. In this instance, I learn Jack Flag is imprisoned on the station. If I free him, I'll see him later in the stage. For now, I have bigger things to worry about.

The eerie exploration is soon crashed by surviving Nova Corps troops. Gamora soon notes they're glowing purple, and once they start talking, it's clear something is off. After realizing a fanatical cult has infiltrated the Nova Corps ranks, a battle ensues. Star-Lord can use his blasters at range, float above the battlefield, or get up close for melee attacks. However, the meat of the combat involves issuing commands to your fellow Guardians.

By tapping the bumper, a menu maps each squadmate to a face button for commands. Drax hits hard and typically inflicts stagger on his targets, while Gamora is a bit speedier and more precise. Groot's moves often set up combinations for the heroes, while Rocket's tech attacks deal AoE damage. Each Guardian operates on a cooldown, so you can't just spam their attacks, but if you combine them just right, you can deal deadly damage and turn the tide of the fight. Once you hurt the enemies enough, you can execute a cinematic finisher that involves all the Guardians volleying the enemy back and forth.

You can also use an ultimate-style attack called a Huddle. Huddles operate on a longer cooldown, and when you activate one, the team circles up like a football team. The Guardians express their concerns, and you're given two choices for your response. If you properly address their worries, the entire team gets a temporary boost. Answer incorrectly, and the team walks away confused, and only Star-Lord gets a boost. Either way, the team's health is restored, and you get an upbeat soundtrack with which to blast enemies.

It's obvious Eidos-Montréal nailed the tone of Marvel's favorite space misfits. However, it remains to be seen if combat stays exciting over the massive number of encounters we're sure to have during the game's full length. Thankfully, we'll know the answers to any uncertainty surrounding Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy in the coming weeks. » **Brian Shea**

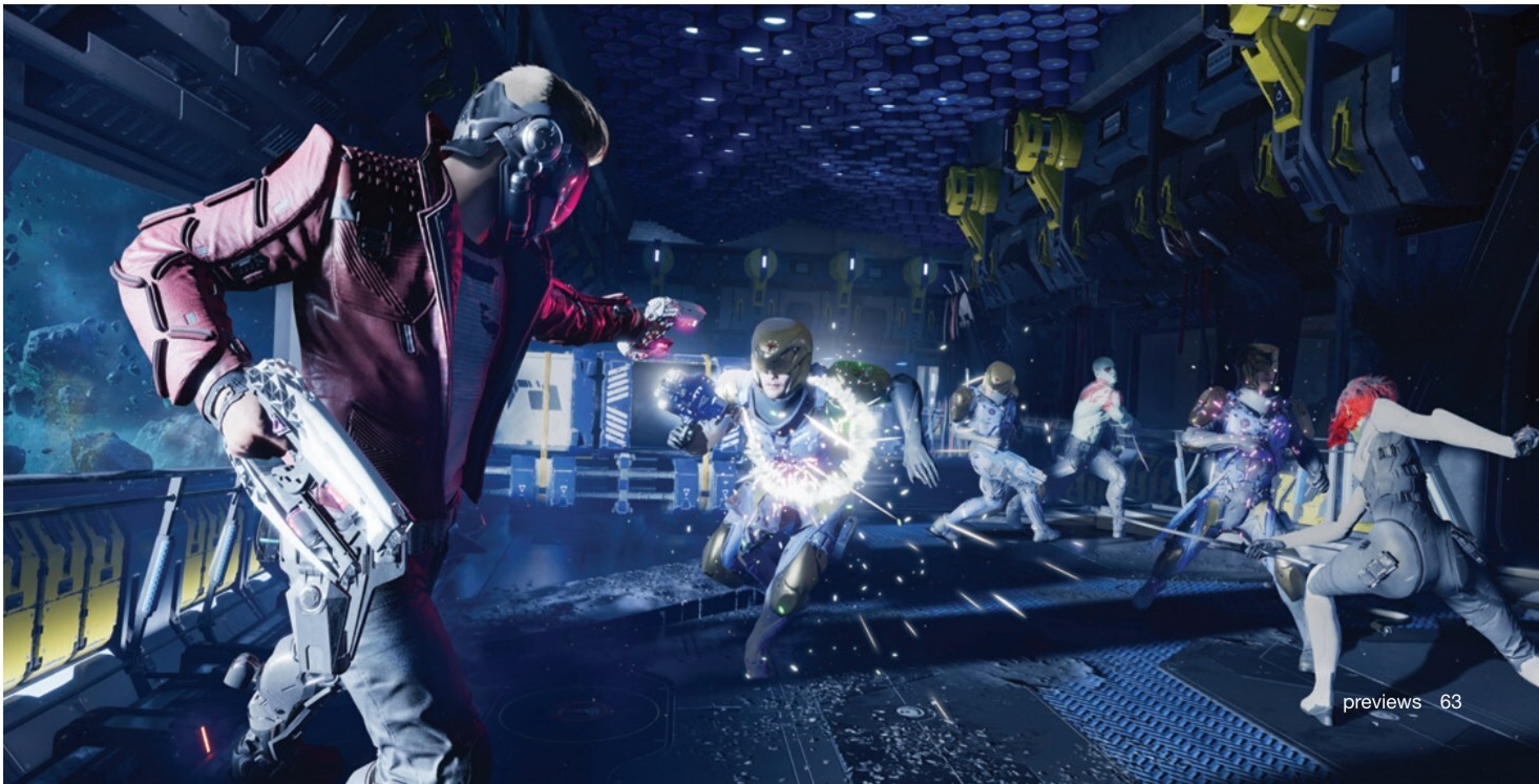
» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
Eidos-Montréal

» Release
October 26



Dying Light 2: Stay Human

Waiting even longer to rise from the dead

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Techland

» Developer
Techland

» Release
February 4

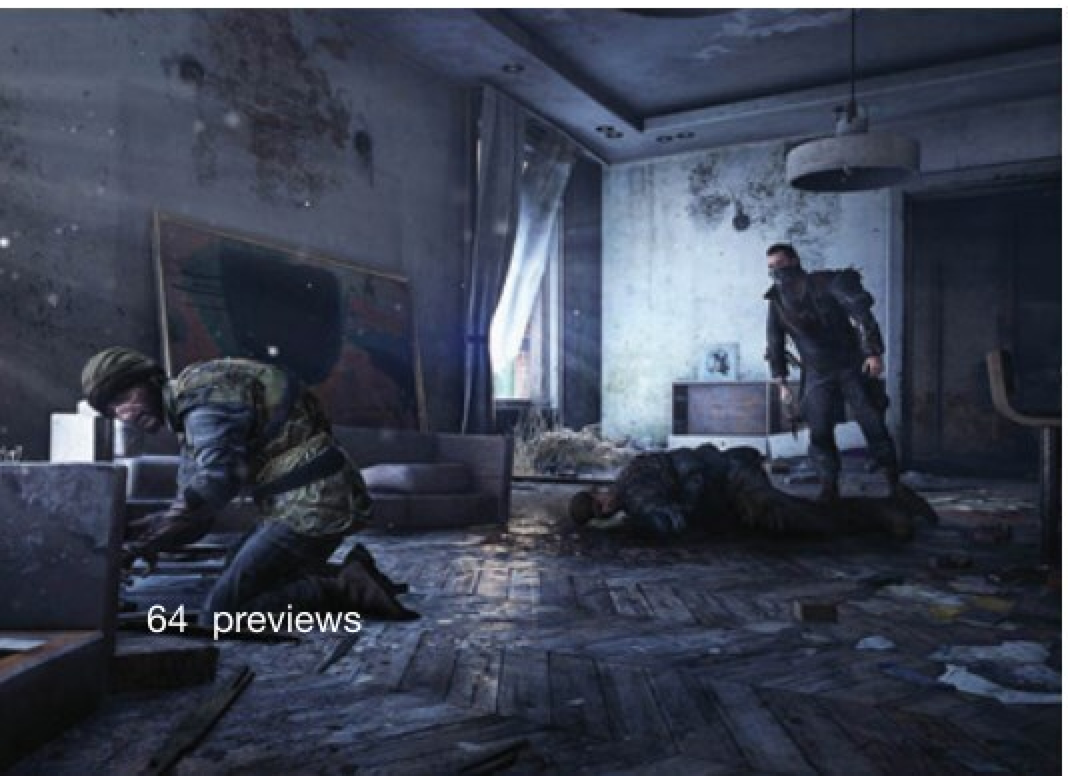
Ever since Dyling Light 2's gameplay reveal at E3 2019, we've been eagerly anticipating jumping back into Techland's bleak apocalypse. While the game received its first significant delay in early 2020, the studio intended to make its December 7, 2021 release date. However, Techland last month announced fans will have to wait a bit longer, as Dying Light 2: Stay Human was delayed to February 2022.

Having seen Dying Light 2: Stay Human in action, it's easy to see why this project is a massive undertaking. Not only is the city huge and the visuals impressively improved over its predecessor, but player choice permeates seemingly every corner of this undead apocalypse. In my first time seeing the game, I witnessed entire new city blocks made available and new enemy types unearthed based on the choice made at the end of a pivotal story mission. These giant leaps forward from the first game add up to create an astoundingly ambitious project.

On top of those exciting elements, Dying Light 2 enhances the first game's already satisfying parkour and combat. With much of the population turned into monsters, as a surviving human, you typically have two choices: fight or run. Everyone's first instinct in gaming is to fight, so Techland iterated the mechanics to nail the tricky balance of making first-person combat feel satisfying, effective, challenging, and intuitive. Consecutive hits on the same enemy cause greater reactions, enhancing immersion and delivering a more tactile feel. Foes also react differently based on what type of enemy they are, what weapon you use, and what part of the body you target; some parts may even fly off when all those factors are considered. Techland also doubled down on giving players the moves they need to get creative when they have no choice but to stand their ground and fight.

However, where you find one zombie, you're likely to see many more, so the prudent choice is often to hightail it. As tricky as first-person combat is to pull off, first-person platforming is substantially more difficult. The parkour in the first Dying Light was good, but Techland knew it could improve by leaps and bounds. That's why, rather than build on top of its existing work, the studio scrapped the entire system and carried the lessons it learned over to completely rebuild parkour mechanics for the sequel. Thanks to hundreds of new animations, you have access to much more fluid freerunning. Whether you're swinging from ropes, hang gliding, wall-running, or scaling a building, you have all the tools you need to traverse The City like a pro from the early stages of the game, and your skills only increase as you continue to progress your character. The more you play, the more you notice synergies between parkour moves, letting you feel like you're flowing through the environment.

While it's certainly disappointing we have to wait a few additional months to get our hands on Dying Light 2: Stay Human, we're hopeful this ultimately spells a better fate for the project. As we've learned with games like Cyberpunk 2077, an earlier game isn't always a better one. Hopefully, by delaying Dying Light 2, Techland is giving itself the time necessary to make the finished product worthy of the lofty expectations it has garnered. » **Brian Shea**



Tiny Tina's Wonderlands

The looter shooter meets the tabletop

Borderlands and its zany looter shooter template are merging with a fantasy tabletop vibe to create a new experience. With the chaotic Tiny Tina as the Dungeon Master running the game, players create characters from six core classes and delve into dark forests, creepy castles, and welcoming towns. Sure, the backdrop for this game is unabashedly rooted in many Borderlands aspects, but the tabletop influence is more than just a skin over the tried-and-true formula. While some established characters definitely make appearances, the Wonderlands world is a new canvas on which Gearbox is painting with a radical, new color.

First, players can multiclass to create powerful combinations to suit their playstyle. Multiclassing allows players to combo up, picking complementary strengths for fantasy archetypes. Melee attacks and spellcasting round out gunplay, so even though players are going to be rushing around blasting the hell out of sharks with crossbow bolts, many other attacks are viable and contribute to the gameplay flow. For instance, unleashing a salvo from your weapon may supercharge up a melee attack, encouraging the player to let loose from afar, dip in for a massive strike, and then head back out to a ranged position again. Spells include the essential, potent fireballs and mighty meteors encompass a wide variety of buffs and other skills. Each class has two "ultimate" skills to pick from and can have one selected at any given time.

Feel like rolling for loot? You can. An overworld map lets players, represented by adorable little tabletop bobbleheads, pick missions and even find luck dice loot challenges where the die roll impacts your dropped rewards. Roll a 1? Better luck next time. Roll a 20? You're going to be swimming in high-quality rare drops. On this giant board of decisions, players can continue with the primary campaign or dive into many side missions that still have a role in the story, offering context and additional information on some of the other characters, locations, and more.

As in tabletop games, players can allocate stat points and find the perfect set of equipment for their characters as they take on everything from traditional skeletons to goblin bands armed with uzis. Gear breaks down into different categories, much like a Borderlands game, but obviously, they won't have the same manufacturers that players are familiar with from the sci-fi setting. Tiny Tina is a wild DM, so expect her to serve up serious chaos in the middle of a quaint fantasy quest. If you need to take a break from the action, head to the town of Brighthoof and its soda tavern to rest, organize your gear, and engage with the various progression elements before setting out into the world again.

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands is a breath of fresh air for an established franchise. Taking the action and rambunctiousness of Borderlands to a traditional tabletop fantasy setting seems like a big win on paper. With Tiny Tina's wacky machinations at the helm, we don't expect to get bored sitting around the table when Wonderlands hits next year.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Gearbox Software

» **Release**
March 25

Mario Party Superstars

Looking back on the celebrations

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1 to 4-Player Party
(4-Player Online)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
NDcube

» Release
October 29

Depending on who you ask, Mario Party's glory days can land in nearly any era of the series' 22-year history. However, for many, the best years took place in the early days, on consoles like the N64 and GameCube. Coming off the well-received Super Mario Party in 2018, series developer NDcube is paying tribute to those early days through Mario Party Superstars.

This new compilation offers five classic game boards from the Nintendo 64 Mario Party titles. Players can traverse boards like the frosted frontiers of Peach's Birthday Cake from the first Mario Party or interstellar Space Land from Mario Party 2. Each stage features different strategies and wacky events that can unfold to keep players on their toes. I'm excited to revisit my favorites from the early games, but I am a little concerned about the low number of boards offered in this package – even the original Mario Party gave you eight boards to choose from if you include unlockable levels.

The game boards aren't all that's back from past games. Mario Party Superstars also brings a collection of 100 minigames from past parties. While many of the board-game break-up diversions are from the Nintendo 64 and GameCube entries, players can expect games spanning the series. In the early footage we've seen, we saw fan-favorite competitions like Face Lift, Bowser's Big Blast, Vine with Me, and plenty more. On top of the 100 competitive and cooperative minigames from games past, you can also take part in item minigames where you can add additional boosts to your inventory.

Of course, what's a party without a solid guest list? In keeping with the compilation theme, Mario Party Superstars invites several of the series' mainstay characters to join the festivities. Players can party as or alongside Mario, Luigi, Yoshi, Peach, Birdo, Wario, Waluigi, Rosalina, and Donkey Kong.

Perhaps the most enticing thing about this collection is that every game mode is playable on the same system, locally through wireless connectivity, or online. That means you can hop online to spend a few minutes playing your favorite minigames or take the full 30 turns with three of your closest friends. Since Mario Party is all about having fun with others, you can communicate using in-game stickers to cheer or jeer your fellow partygoers.

Also, if you and your friends run out of time before all the turns are up, you can save your progress mid-game. Mario Party Superstars also features random matchmaking for those whose friends are all partied out, but you're unable to save your progress mid-game if you're playing with random people.

The Mario Party franchise, with its bite-sized minigames and interchangeable game boards, is tailor-made for the compilation format. While Mario Party: The Top 100 has already attempted this feat on 3DS, I'm hopeful bringing that concept, along with several classic game boards, to consoles makes for an even better experience than before. » **Brian Shea**

Shin Megami Tensei V

Dark days ahead

Announced back in 2017, it's been a long road to Shin Megami Tensei V, but the end is almost in sight with the release date right around the corner. The series has been an RPG standby since the early '90s, captivating players with its dark storylines, philosophical dilemmas, and recruitment mechanics. Now a new generation is about to see what the cult series is all about, and we're taking one last look at what you can expect from the new post-apocalyptic RPG set in modern-day Tokyo.

The new entry is coming at an interesting time in the world, and that isn't lost on Atlus. In an interview with Weekly Famitsu, producer Kazuyuki Yamai said Shin Megami Tensei V would depict modern issues, like unemployment, retirement fears, terrorism, nuclear weapons, and troubled home life. The SMT series has always had a darker, more philosophical take on the world, forcing you to think about aspects such as religion, hierarchy, and humanity. This entry puts you in the middle of a war between demons and angels, where they've gone to great lengths to prevent human involvement. It's up to you to decide what's worth saving and what you'll sacrifice for the world you know.

You play as a third-year high school student and begin your journey stumbling upon a murder and getting separated from your friends in the chaos. While you're lost in a tunnel, an earthquake occurs. Upon awakening, you're alone in an alternative apocalyptic version of Tokyo called "Da'at." This is where everything changes as you meet a mysterious man who offers his assistance, fusing with you to become a condemned being referred to as a "Nahobino." With special powers, you re-enter the real world, only to realize that demons have overrun it, and a new organization called Bethel is recruiting your classmates to fight these demons.

The tried-and-true press-turn combat system is still front and center in Shin Megami Tensei V, and, just like in previous games, you turn enemy demons into allies. Every demon has its own quirks and personality types, but Atlus says to also expect some new behavioral patterns and moon phases, particularly new and full moons, to affect their temperaments. Visiting Sophia in the World of Shadows allows you to create more powerful demons, whether you're merging 2-4 demons together for special fusions, or using elemental fusions to upgrade or downgrade to another demon within the same family.

You also have some additional ways to add skills and improve the stats of your party. Essences – spiritual cores imbued with the powers of demons – can be found as you explore the parallel world of Da'at and interact with the demons there. Fusing these with the protagonist lets you customize his skills and affinities to your liking, but you can also use them on your demon party members to adjust their powers. While exploring Da'at, you will also come across Glory, a manifestation of divine dignity. When you visit the World of Shadows, you can spend Glory to obtain Miracles, which are powerful abilities that alter the laws of nature. According to Atlus, they provide a variety of skills that can assist you in battle, negotiations, demon fusions, skill potentials, and even stat-building.

Atlus has kept a lot about Shin Megami Tensei V under wraps, and it's likely because the story choices are so integral to the experience. I personally can't wait to agonize over my decisions and see their ripple effect across this post-apocalyptic version of Tokyo.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
Switch

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Sega

» **Developer**
Atlus

» **Release**
November 12

Forza Horizon 5

The greatest roadshow on Earth

» **Platform**
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
12-Player
Online Racing

» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios

» **Developer**
Playground Games

» **Release**
November 9

Globetrotters and car fanatics alike have been right at home in Forza Motorsport's open-world, arcade racing counterpart. From vast stateside locations like Colorado to the vibrant asphalt streets of Mediterranean Europe, Xbox owners have drifted on sharp turns and skidded down empty freeways for years.

This fall, Playground Games is spoiling everyone with a lavish, one-way trip to Mexico. Expect lava-covered slopes pooling into frosted plateaus, puddle-spotted forests home to rare fauna, arid deserts with blinding sandstorms, and graffitied, sleepy towns adjacent to scenic beaches. Forza Horizon 5 promises to be a literal paradise on console, a next-gen getaway for virtual speedsters everywhere.

The game's opening minutes premiered earlier this summer. In proper Forza Horizon fashion, cutscenes dropped powerhouse vehicles like the 2021 Ford Bronco Badlands and the Mercedes AMG One into some of the most visually arresting locations for players to traverse. In one moment, you're chugging down a towering volcano into the cloud cover below, and the next, you're squeezing through alleyways in a small community overlooking the sparkling sea, complete with skinny palm trees.

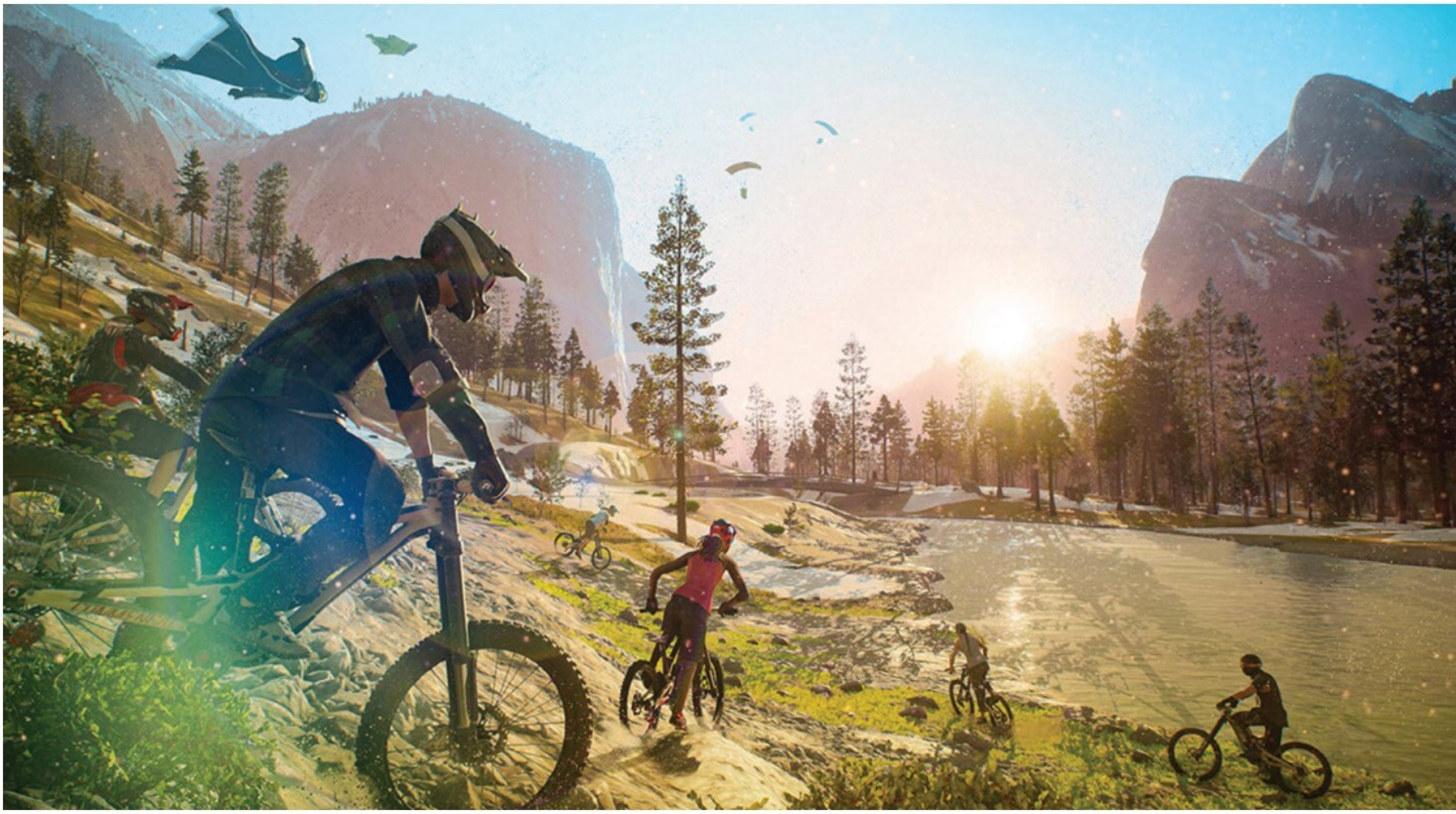
Like previous installments, players can experience all of this and more with a crew. E3 footage showcased seamless multiplayer integration so you won't have to wait in lobbies or parse through loading screens to appreciate the scenery with friends; you can sit back, relax, and enjoy the co-op ride.

The Horizon Festival is still at the forefront of the narrative, and drivers can feel free to head towards each Mexican biome only after scrolling through the franchise's largest roster of cars to date – 400 and counting! Familiar contests like street, dirt, road, and cross-country races are back alongside a new progression system. Collecting accolade points from completed challenges coincides with embarking on Expeditions, exploratory missions that task you with scouring various environments for special events to partake in or story beats to uncover. Creative director Mike Brown appropriately used the term "snackability" to refer to Horizon 5's extensive charcuterie board of activities.

Six Horizon Festivals are waiting to be championed. Combined with the most dynamic and detailed sandbox in the series, featuring changing seasons and post-launch content in the works, Forza Horizon 5 will likely keep its player base satisfied for hours upon hours. » **Jason Guisao**

Riders Republic

This massively multiplayer sports adventure shreds



Riders Republic is one of my biggest surprises of 2021, and after roughly five hours of hands-on time with the game, it's one of my most anticipated fall releases. If this game wasn't previously on your radar, let me get you up to speed: Riders Republic is a massively multiplayer playground. This sports adventure features a giant open world fully explorable by bikes, skis, snowboards, rocket wingsuits, paragliders, and more. You can group up with friends to compete in downhill races, freestyle trick events, team battles, and cross-country endurance tests that combine multiple playstyles.

Sports games are nothing without game feel, and in Riders Republic, Ubisoft Annecy nails it. Your vision blurs at high speeds, the camera shakes naturally with every jump, colors desaturate when you've sustained a rough landing, and controller vibrations make drifting into tight curves feel thrilling. Even when hazards like rocks and trees are whizzing by at breakneck speeds, the game's controls remain precise; if you wipe out at a crucial moment, the Backtrack system lets you rewind to a previous position and get back in action.

While I'm usually not a huge fan of Ubisoft's open worlds, the company's commitment to crafting massive levels pays off here, as the game's multitude of landscapes is a joy to discover. The Riders Republic map combines iconic U.S. geography, including Mammoth Mountain, Grand Teton, Bryce Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Sequoia Park, and Zion National Park. Whether by mountain bike, paraglider, or backcountry ski, you can explore these huge areas how you like. While its NPCs may gently guide you towards nearby activities, netting you new gear and unique cosmetics, the game mostly gets out of your way, letting you enjoy your time traversing its peaks and valleys. I love scouting steep trails from the air with the Rocket Wingsuit and then landing and riding downhill while soaking in the sights in the first-person mode.

Riders Republic offers various races and freestyle exhibitions, but none of those activities provide as much spectacle as the game's Mass Races. Players can join these giant multiplayer events by visiting Riders Ridge, the in-game social hub, a few times per hour. These three-round races are absolute chaos, featuring up to 64 players depending on which system you're playing on, and require players to switch between different traversal modes throughout each leg. One race starts on a downhill trail of dizzying turns, transitions into a rocket-powered ski section through a heavily wooded ravine, and finally requires players to race through the skies to the finish line. While they aren't the most dignified form of competition, Mass Races provide a level of absurd fun reminiscent of last year's Fall Guys.

I was initially hesitant to get my hopes up for a new sports game following the company's lackluster 2016 game, Steep. Still, after playing Riders Republic, I'm confident Ubisoft is headed in the right direction now. While some mechanics still need fine-tuning – grinding on rails feels floaty and lacks a balancing system – I can't stop thinking about Riders Republic. Regardless of how you explore its topography, this extreme sports game offers an abundance of playstyles and progression systems. Ubisoft is taking a leap of faith by doubling down on the extreme sports genre, and I'm eager to see if it can stick the landing. » **Alex Van Aken**

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
64-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Annecy

» Release
October 28

Sifu

Striking while the iron is hot

» Platform
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Sloclap

» Developer
Sloclap

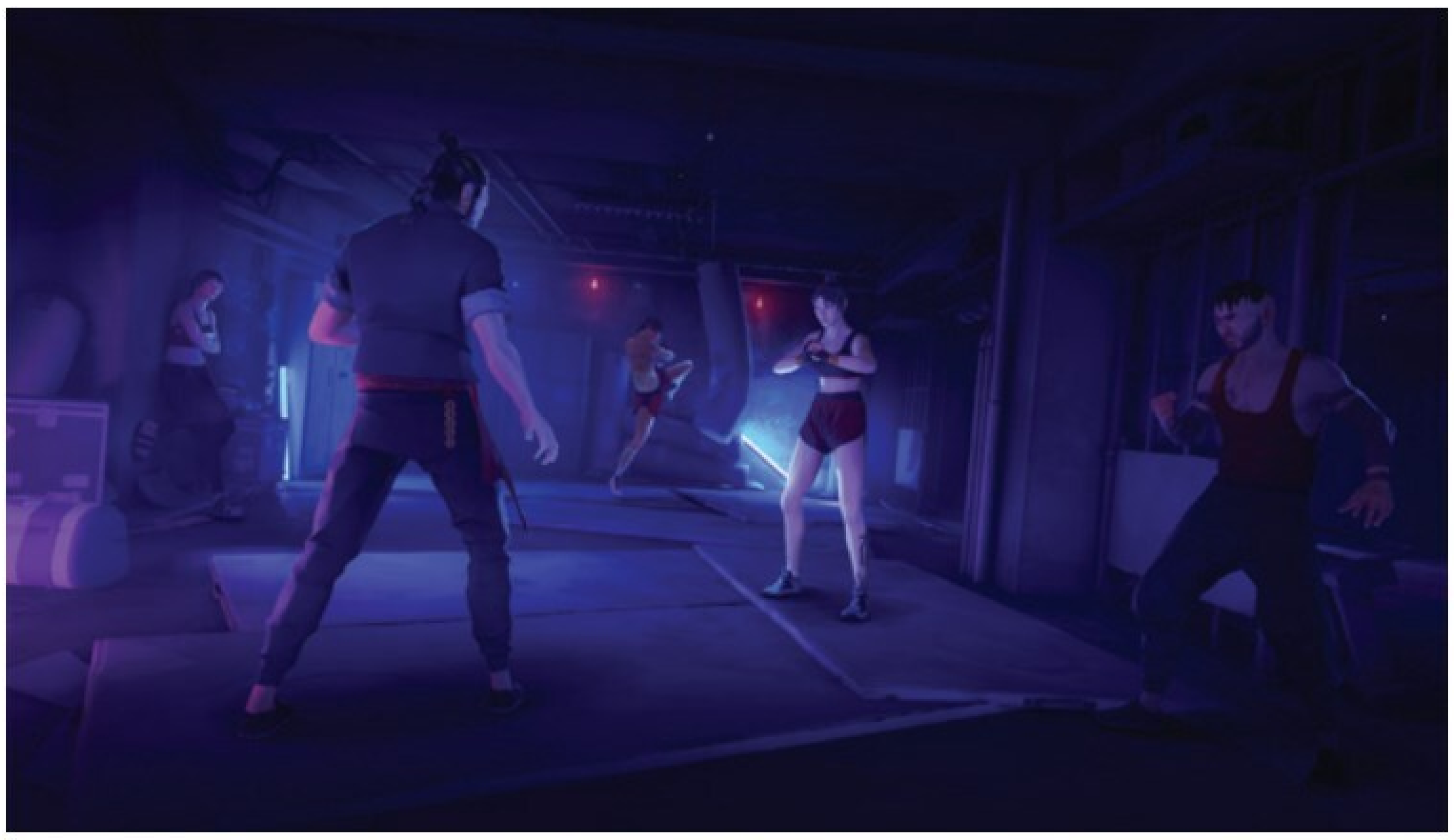
» Release
February 22

Sifu harkens back to an era when Hong Kong action films drew impressively large audiences to movie theaters and living room couches. In previous martial arts adaptations, the "shenguai wuxia" trope relied heavily on cheap special effects and jarring animations. But the kung fu film resurgence in the '70s was built on moving away from melodrama and cliches to depict the grittiness of fluid hand-to-hand combat appropriately. In a similar vein, Sloclap's latest action game is about grace through physicality – how a swift-but-deliberate combination of jabs can speak louder than words.

Like the epic movies that inspired it, Sifu transports players to a dystopian Chinese metropolis complete with death arenas masquerading as nightclubs, sterile, white-walled museums with experimental (and breakable!) art pieces, and rundown public housing complexes. You'll choose a male or female avatar and embark on a quest to avenge your fallen family. A group of mysterious assassins calls the shady underbelly of this Hong Kong-like city their home, and once you've made your presence known – likely, with a flying kick – they'll stop at nothing to take you down. These targets don't know that you're something of a "guerrilla" kung fu master; you'll do anything to stay one step ahead of the opposition. Interrogate cowering enemies for more information, increase your combat proficiency at shrines so that the environment becomes a lethal weapon, and return to life, albeit a bit older and wiser, every time the violent journey is unexpectedly cut short.

Dynamic cinematography gives the action a film-like quality. In one engagement, the free camera becomes anchored in a side-scrolling segment reminiscent of the Korean psychological thriller *Oldboy*. Enemies sprint down an apartment hallway, practically colliding with your knuckles on entrance. Others attempt to set up ambushes from behind seemingly vacant apartments or sharp corners. You kick a nearby crate to take the feet out from underneath one grunt and then slam another into a wall for an immediate takedown. Stronger foes, however, add nuance to the loop with unmatched speed or devastating grapples. Because death is an expectation, Sifu contains roguelike elements – you can't salvage certain stat increases and combo upgrades – giving more weight to each attempt at victory. As you near each specified assailant, reality begins to blend with the fantastical – a visual metaphor of magical realism that symbolizes Sifu's emphasis on human folly in the face of endless bloodshed.

» **Jason Guisao**



Crusader Kings III Console Edition

Long may you reign

New-gen console players can prepare to wage war, found a new religion, or revolutionize the Middle Ages, because Crusader Kings III is coming to PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S. For those who haven't heard of the series until this point, the original Crusader Kings debuted in 2004. Made by Paradox Development Studio, the title deviated from the developer's previous work on games like Europa Universalis by giving players control of a specific dynasty. Crusader Kings focuses on ruling individuals' characteristics rather than having players manage various parts of their territory as an omniscient entity.

Crusader Kings received middling reviews upon release, but there was still enough interest to encourage Paradox to develop a sequel. Reaching greater heights than its predecessor, Crusader Kings II launched nearly 10 years later, in 2012, and succeeded in securing mild critical acclaim and a more extensive fan base for the franchise. A Crusader Kings title has never been released specifically for consoles before, sticking to PC where the sweeping strategy games have a large audience.

After selling over a million copies in less than a month when it debuted on Steam, receiving the highest scores of the series, and dominating social media for weeks with players' wild stories about their dramatic in-game maneuverings, the third entry in the series, Crusader Kings III, is now ready to make the platform jump.

Crusader Kings III is a grand strategy role-playing game that puts you in the regal boots of a medieval monarch. You can choose to start your adventure in either 867 or 1066, and the game's story continues through 1453, giving you a few generations of royalty to play around with. Players also pick their starting royal house, government type – like feudal, tribal, or clan – lifestyle, and more. As your nation's ruler, you have the power to mold its fate through your decisions and intrigues. You can build up your military by recruiting your loyal subjects to fight with you when you take the field of battle or need to put down a troublesome rebellion. You can grow alliances through cleverly arranged marriages, gaining influence over neighboring countries without bloodshed. Or you can decide to focus on religious affairs, either cultivating the goodwill of your kingdom's religious leaders or abandoning them entirely to follow a heretical system.

To get Crusader Kings III ready for consoles, developer Paradox Interactive has teamed up with Lab42. Together, the partners have ensured the game takes full advantage of the current-gen's available technology. The medieval dynasty simulator's design has been overhauled with gamepad support for both PlayStation and Xbox controllers. Players in Microsoft's ecosystem will be able to pick the game up with an Xbox Game Pass subscription, while PlayStation 5 owners can look forward to specially created DualSense feedback. We don't know when this new console edition of Crusader Kings III will release, but the developers promise it will be soon. » **Jill Grodt**

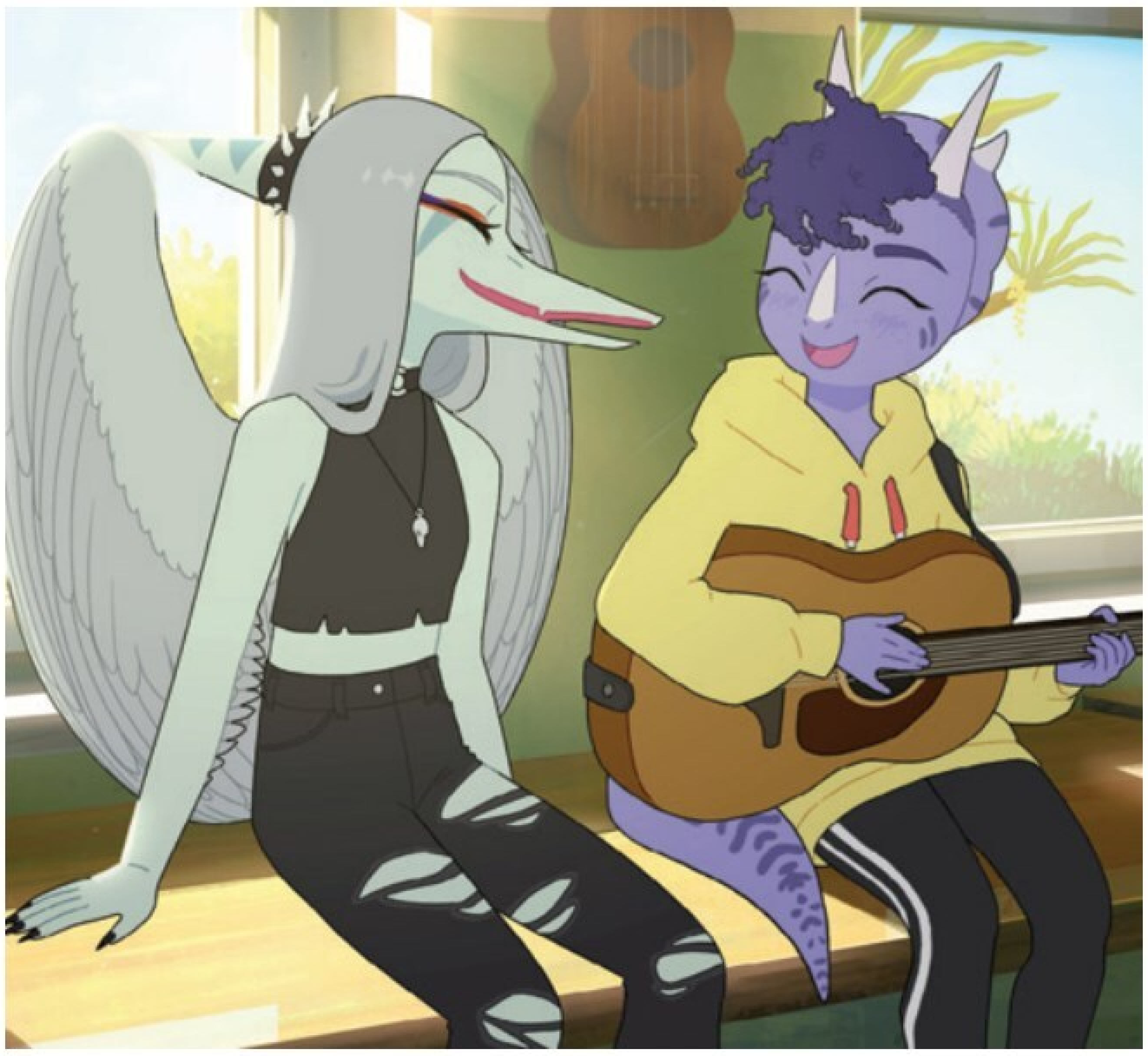
» **Platform**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy (12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Paradox Interactive

» **Developer**
Paradox Development Studio, Lab42

» **Release**
TBA

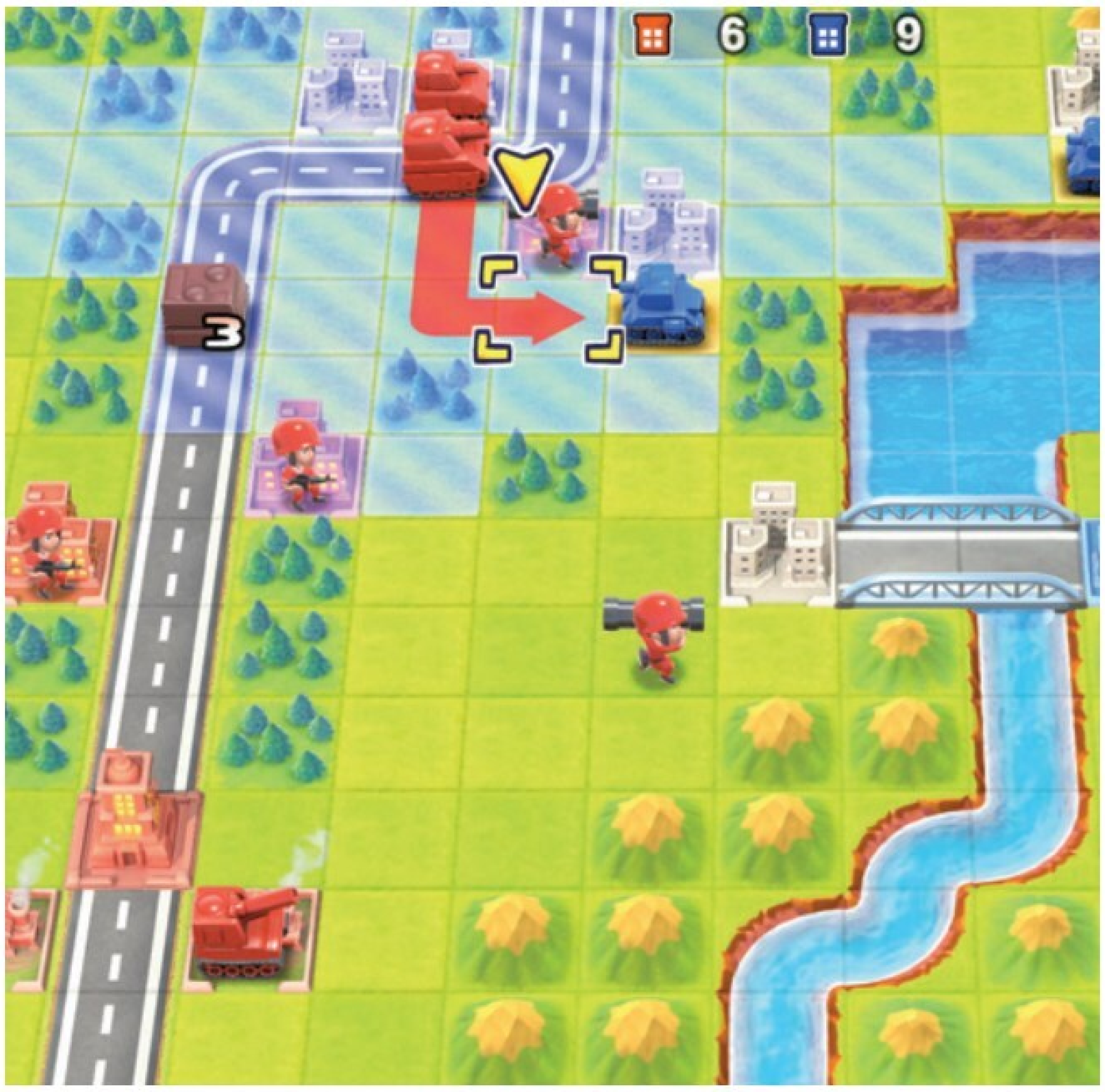


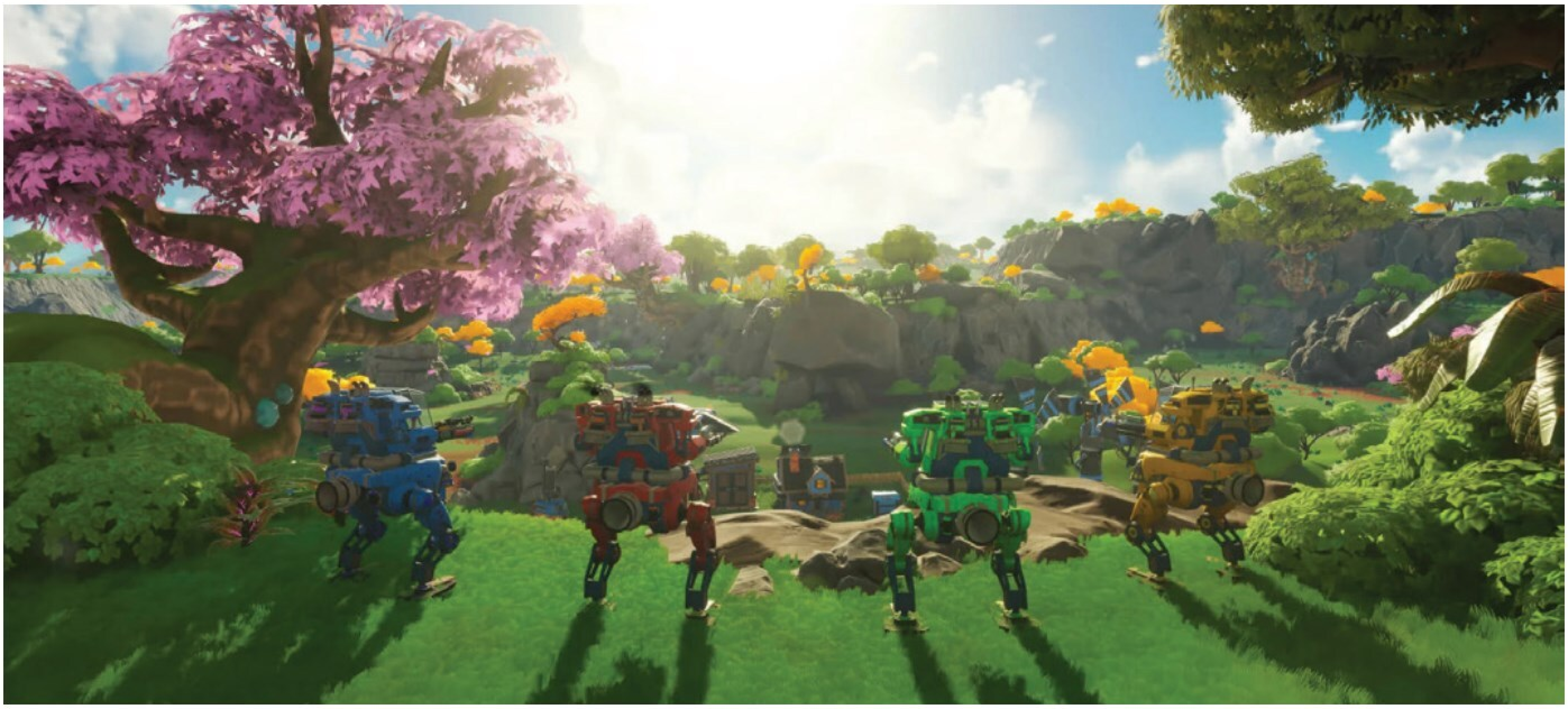
Goodbye Volcano High

This dinosaur-themed coming-of-age title stars Fang, a high school senior trying to figure themselves out as graduation looms on the horizon. As if stressing over how to confess your feelings to a crush, writing a hit song for your band, or dealing with the everyday drama surrounding family (chosen or otherwise) wasn't enough pressure, the world is about to explode. This mostly relatable premise is told through a narrative-focused adventure game featuring choice-driven gameplay, branching plot threads, and even music-making mechanics. Goodbye Volcano High comes to PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, and PC in 2022.

Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp

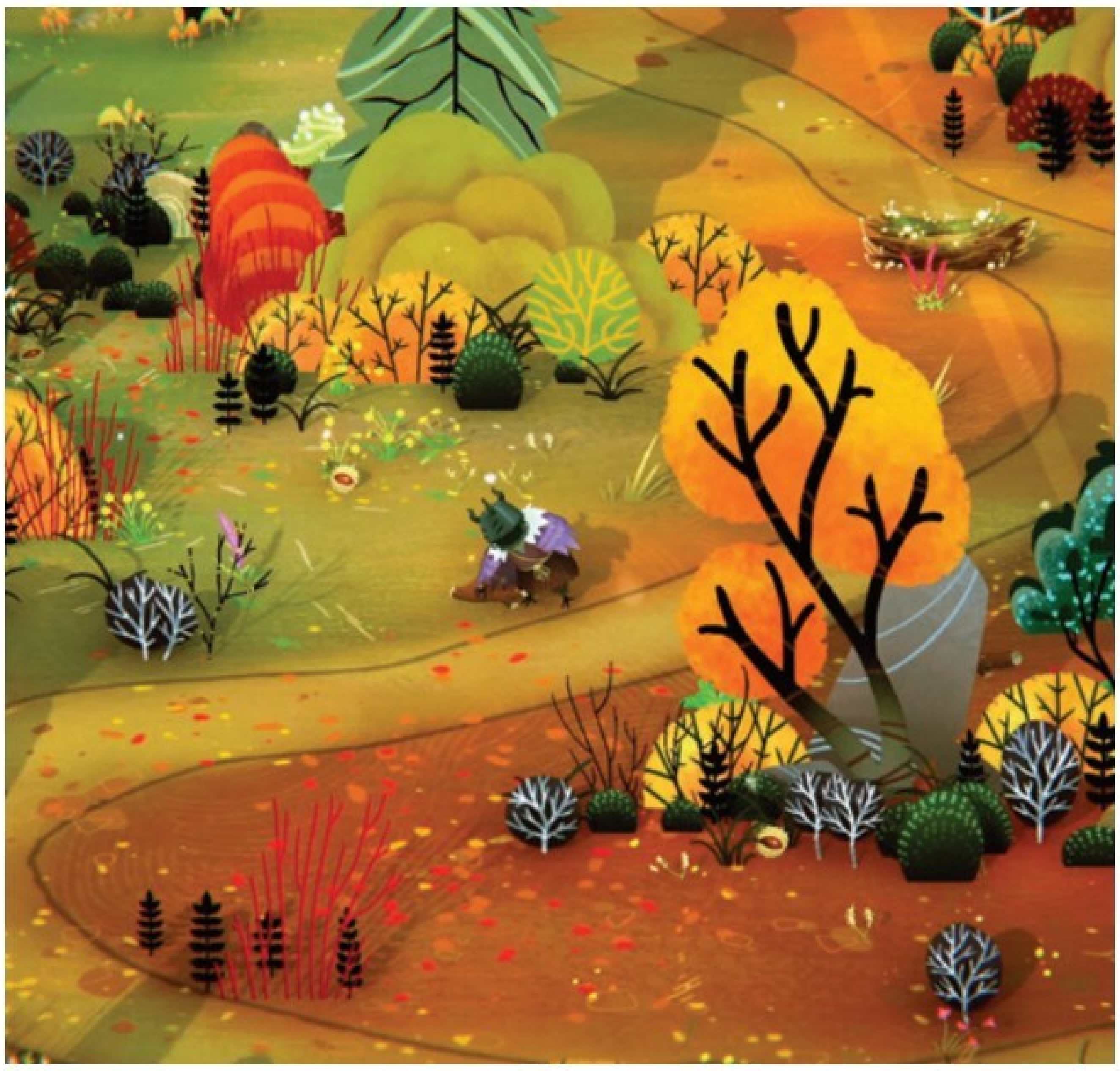
After a long absence from the broader gaming consciousness, Advance Wars is poised to make a comeback. However, rather than being an all-new entry to the beloved strategy series, Nintendo is remaking the two most well-liked games with modern visuals, two full-length campaigns, a four-player Versus mode, and maps from both games. You can test your strategic mettle when Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp blasts its way onto Switch on December 3.





Lightyear Frontier

If humanity wants to survive its journey into the stars, we'll need to learn how to farm on other planets. Frame Break and Amplifier Game Invest's are aiming to give players a taste of that sci-fi farm life with their upcoming crafting and resource management game. Would-be astronaut ecologists need to carefully explore their alien world and use crafting resources to build a working farm. Harvested items improve your mobile mech so you can venture deeper into an exotic ecosystem full of ancient ruins and long-buried secrets. Players can terraform their planet or work with up to three friends in online co-op. Lightyear Frontier's full release is TBD, but the creators plan to enter an Early Access period before launch.

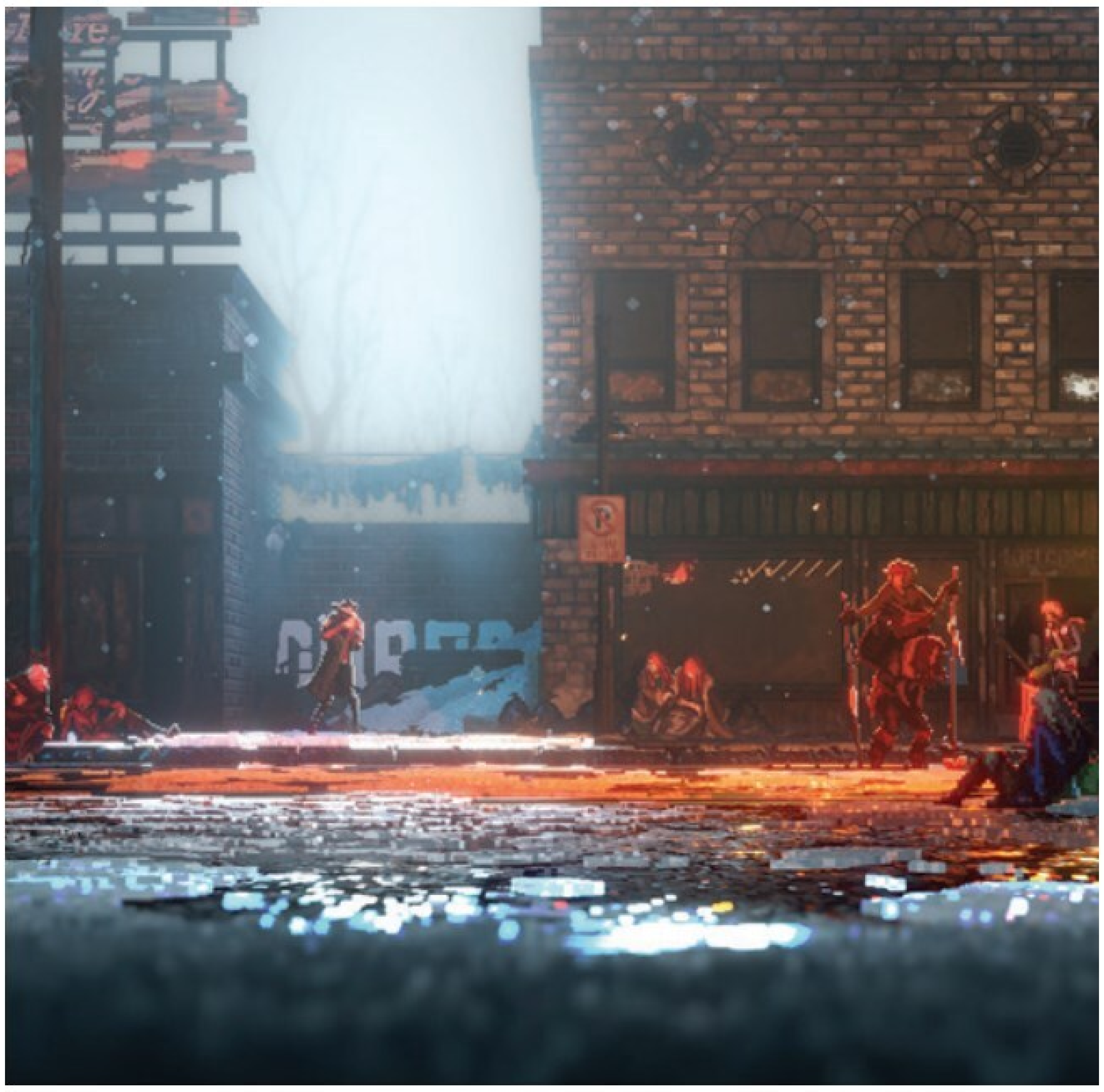


Wytchwood

Wytchwood puts you in the weathered old shoes of a swamp witch, whose magic may be deployed to solve any number of problems. The witch has made an ill-advised dark pact and has no memory of how or why. As you journey to find the answer, you'll interact with various fairytale-inspired characters, solve puzzles, cast curses, and enjoy the whimsical setting. You can drink Wytchwood's potion before the end of the year, when it releases on PlayStation consoles, Xbox consoles, Switch, and PC.

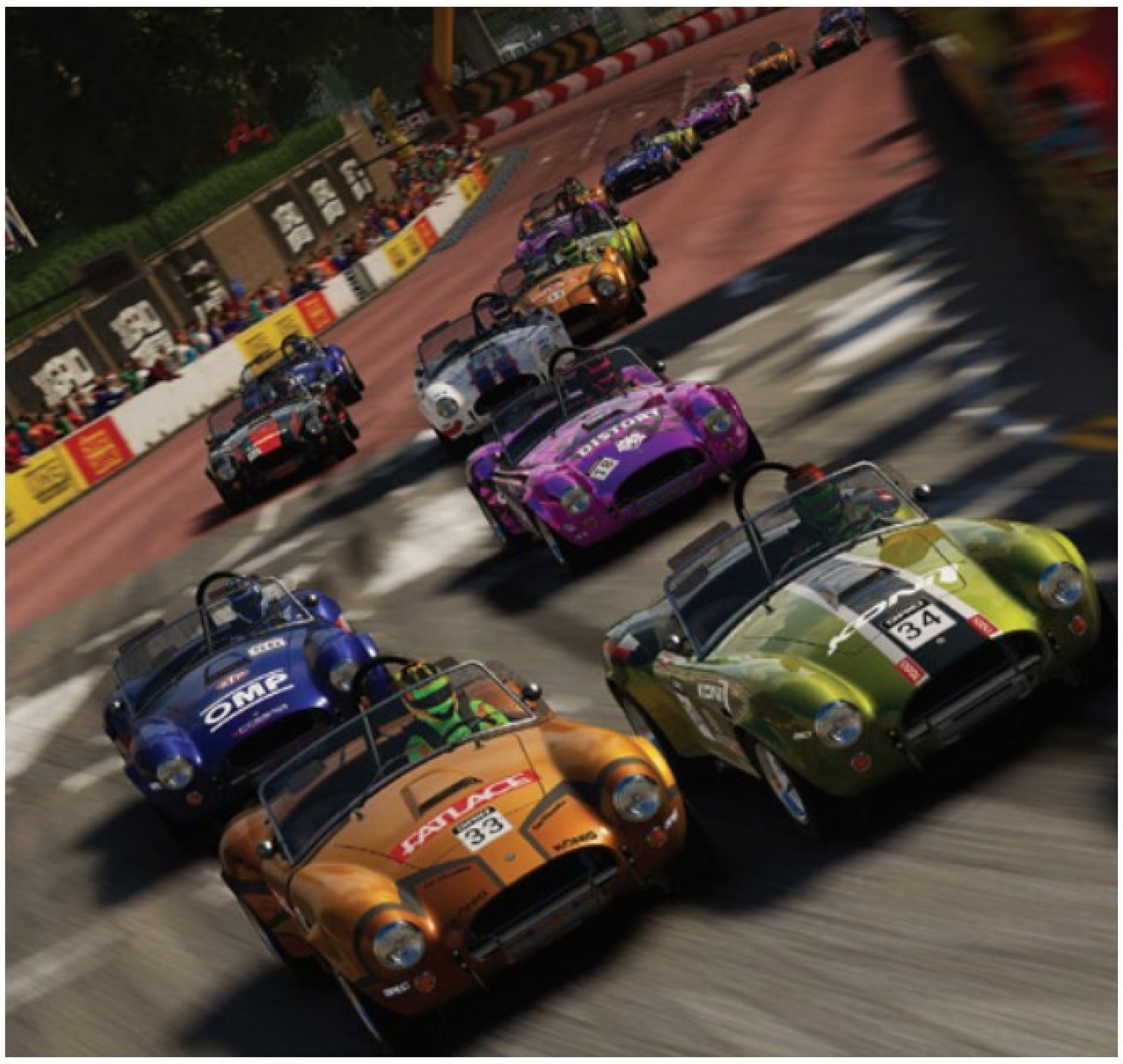
Replaced

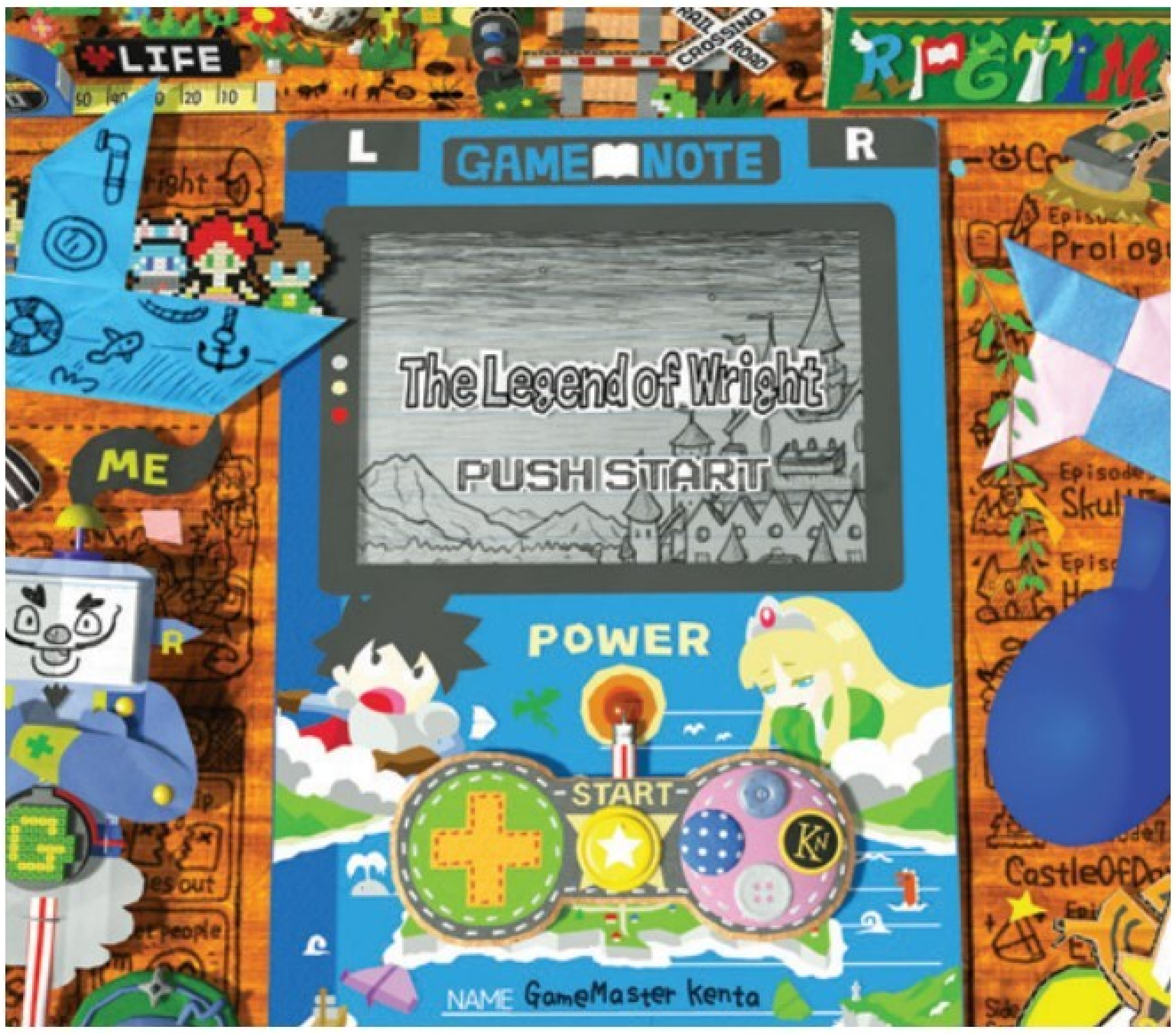
Sad Cat Studios captured our attention with the first trailer for Replaced, a 2.5D sci-fi game set in an alternate 1980s. Players control an A.I. trapped in a human body against its will. Early glimpses of the action use clever camera work and some sleek pixel animation to create a mesmerizing flow of play. We're definitely catching some post-apocalyptic cyberpunk vibes here; if that's your thing, keep an eye out for launch in 2022 on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC.



Grid Legends

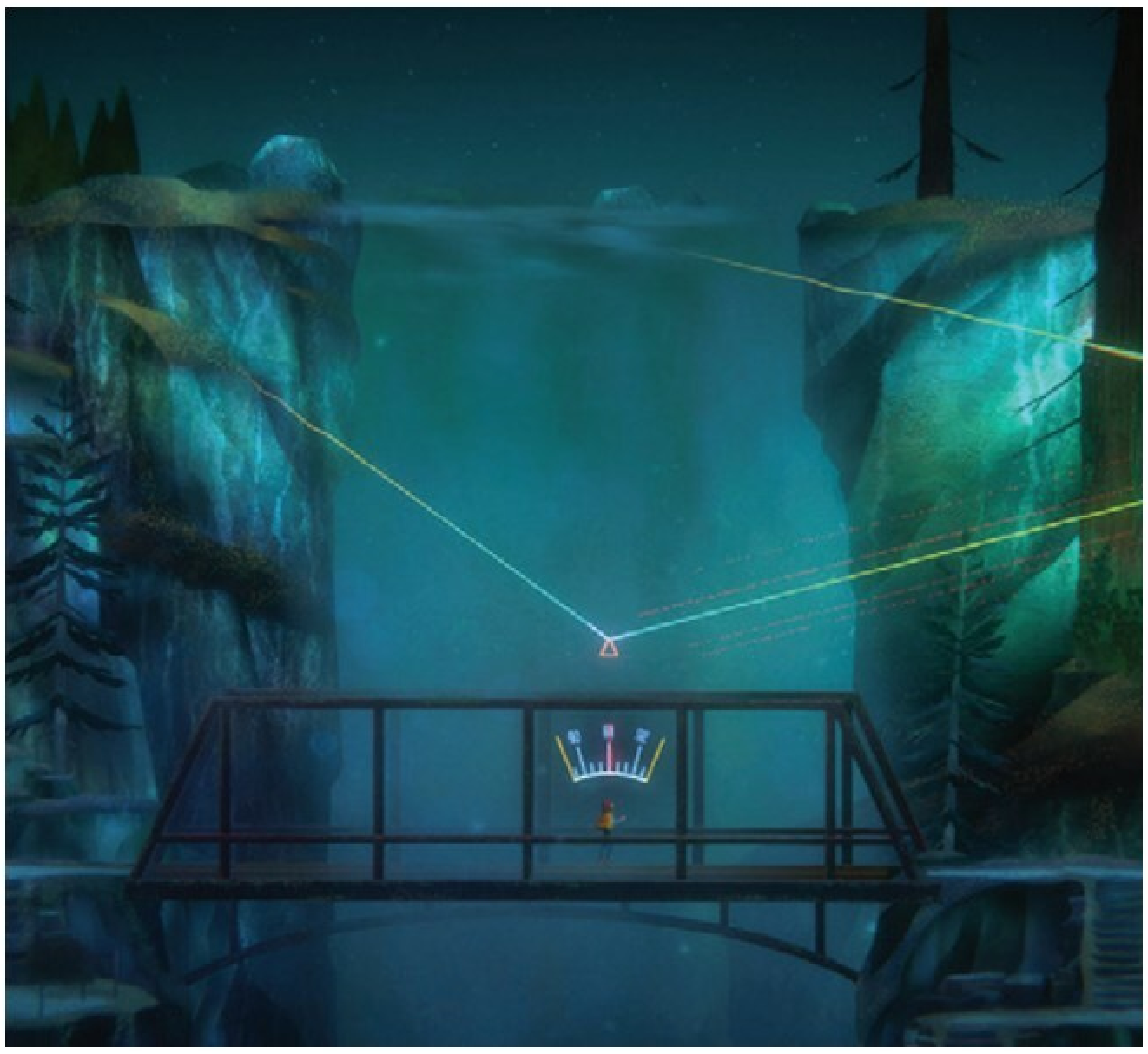
The newest installment in the long-running racing series is upping the drama, mixing high-speed gameplay with a live-action documentary-style story, exploring the characters, conflicts, and rivalries that take place off the track. Whether you buy into the story or not, expect over 100 cars racing along 130 unique routes, including new locales like London and Moscow. Players can also anticipate the return of drift events and a race creator when the game hits PlayStation and Xbox consoles and PC sometime in 2022.





RPG Time: The Legend Of Wright

This indie RPG's unveiling impressed with its hand-drawn visuals, Dragon Quest-like music, and colorful aesthetic. The game comes from a two-member independent Japanese team called Desk Works and is inspired by their elementary school days. The story centers on a youth who wants to become a game developer. You explore the RPG he pens in his notebook, which has you doing everything from facing off against majestic beasts to locating treasure. Something is charming about exploring a world created by the wonder of a child's imagination, so we can't wait to play the game when it releases this winter for Xbox One, PC, iOS, and Android.



Oxenfree II: Lost Signals

Night School Studio's debut project, Oxenfree, straddled the line between paranormal and personal storytelling – teenagers facing their insecurities in the face of a supernatural catastrophe. Oxenfree II: Lost Signals takes place five years after the original and follows protagonist Riley as she returns to her hometown of Camena. The main environment from the first game, Edwards Island, and the odd radio signals that connect the real world to another dimension also appear. Oxenfree II: Lost Signals drops next year on PlayStation consoles, Switch, and PC.

Pupperazzi

Ever wondered what Pokémon Snap would be like if it featured nothing but adorable puppers? Imagine no further because that's Pupperazzi from Sundae Month and Kitfox Games. It's a whimsical game that does what other titles are too afraid to do: make an adventure all about those goodest of good boys. You can run, jump, play with the various dogs throughout the game, snap cute pics with them, and even cuddle them to your heart's content. There's no release date yet, but Pupperazzi is slated to release on Xbox One and PC eventually. It will also be a day one addition to Xbox Game Pass.

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NASCAR 21 IGNITION
XBOX ONE
NASCAR 21 IGNITION CHAMPIONS EDITION
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motorsport GAMES
ALSO ON PS4

Lost Ark

Shepherded by Amazon Games, South Korean studio Smilegate's isometric MMO Lost Ark will be making its western debut on PC in 2022. Set in the fantasy world of Arkesia, environments are packed with demons, dragons, and other mythical creatures to fight. Players adventure as one of five core classes: Warrior, Martial Artist, Mage, Gunner, or Assassin. Each has a suite of specialized class types to choose from as well as the Tripod system which allows players to customize each class to fit a variety of play styles. ◆

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EVERYONE to MATURE 17+ E-M ESRB esrb.org

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 340

78 Tales Of Arise

Arise ushers in a new age for Bandai Namco's prolific JRPG franchise by melding a classic formula – skits, titles, and combo-focused combat – with a grim, mature story and jaw-dropping visuals. There are a number of side activities to keep you preoccupied and inundated in the game's fascinating lore as well as a variety of environments to explore and gawk at. Characters grapple with heavy themes like prejudice and self-hate as well as companionship and compassion. Ultimately, Tales of Arise is all about parallelisms and perfect harmony; it's also the best entry in the series.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	Due to supply chain issues, autumn is unavailable.

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Deathloop

The joys of death and dying

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Bethesda Softworks **Developer** Arkane Studios **Release** September 14 **Rating** M

Deathloop is a paradox, where time is both in infinite supply and quickly running out. Protagonist Colt Vahn is stuck in a timeloop, desperately trying his best to get off the gleefully nihilistic island of Blackreef. The rules of breaking the timeloop seem simple: kill eight targets within 24 hours. Paradoxically, this feat is an intricate clockwork of planning, preparation, and execution that feels impossible at first. It all culminates in one of Arkane Studios' best games to date.

Deathloop begins in media res, as Colt is murdered by a mysterious woman named Julianna Blake. As soon as he dies, he wakes up on a strange beach with no knowledge of who he is or how he got there. Julianna soon makes contact, explaining his situation, and by extension, the game's rules. Colt is on Blackreef, where time is perpetually stuck, and murder is the only way out.

The game revels in its nihilistic world; dying has no meaning on Blackreef, so why not do whatever you want? Death, murder, and all manner of awful things are casual matters, lending dark humor to the whole experience. This kind of storytelling could have become juvenile in the wrong hands, but Deathloop's writing is strong, and I enjoyed seeing the twisted ways it played with the timeloop conceit. Colt and Julianna's interactions – full of bickering and arguments – are almost always entertaining and humorous, and the two are now among my favorite video game characters of the year.

Blackreef is broken into four large districts, each with its own clues on how to proceed, access to targets, and storylines that progress the main plot or serve as side content. Each district has a unique flair – from a city center hosting a massive party to an expansive research station near the coast – and arriving at different times of day changes everything from where guards patrol to who and what is available. You can choose to explore a district at four times of day: morning, noon, afternoon, or evening, and I enjoy the way this makes you plan your routes accordingly.

Tracking leads throughout Blackreef quickly became my favorite part of Deathloop. I love exploring, seeing how the world opens up and how my opportunities change over the course of a day. It takes a while to get to the bottom of any mystery in Deathloop, but the game does a good job of paying you back for your time with fun new ways to play, such as access to new powers, better weapons, and upgrades for both.

Compared to Arkane's previous immersive sim series, Dishonored, Deathloop encourages players to spill as much blood as they want; no penalty or morality system is punishing you for using all the cool weapons and powers at your disposal. Many of those powers are similar to those in Dishonored, including teleporting around levels and chaining multiple enemies together so that killing one kills everyone in the chain. From the get-go, these powers seem like upgraded versions of those in Dishonored, meaning Deathloop is effectively one giant power trip. As I honed my skills and memorized its various levels, I loved loading in and ripping through an environment in a matter of minutes – especially when combined with the game's great arsenal, which includes a nail gun for silent headshots and an SMG that can be reloaded while shooting for a non-stop bullet spray. An in-game currency allows you to carry weapons, powers, and upgrades between loops, which is a helpful touch for alleviating the penalties of death.

The last trick up Deathloop's sleeve is its online component, which pits players against each other. Where the single-player mode focuses on Colt, players can also jump into a mode where they play as Julianna. The former tries to go about their objective as the latter invades other players' games and attempts to hunt them down and kill them. This mechanic can be turned off, but I found that these invasions add a fun bit of tension and spontaneity to runs, especially when playing with a friend I could talk and laugh with. My best-laid plans were useless when Julianna showed up, and the dangerous game of cat and mouse that ensued always left me on edge.

The further I got, the more satisfying it became putting all the various puzzle pieces together until finally, I had a finished plan. I had built dozens of routes to get through my final day, assembled an arsenal of perfect weapons, and chosen the right powers to kill all my targets. And then I botched it all at the last second. But that ever-building sense of knowledge and accomplishment present throughout the game led me to immediately start a new playthrough, to experiment further and explore. In Deathloop, dying is fun, killing is even better, and I can't wait to see what the game throws at me next.

» Blake Hester

9

PS5 • PC

» Concept
Find and kill eight targets in one day, before time resets, and you have to start all over

» Graphics
Each level has its own unique vibe, brought to life with an eye-popping 1960s aesthetic

» Sound
A solid soundtrack featuring catchy and fun original, in-game songs that feel era-appropriate. The banter between the two main characters, Colt and Julianna, is consistently funny and entertaining

» Playability
Mastering Deathloop takes time, but once you do, combining its various powers and weapons almost always results in satisfying – and bloody – outcomes

» Entertainment
Deathloop is a rare game I started replaying as soon as the credits finished rolling. Even deep in a second playthrough, I still discovered new secrets and ways to play

» Replay Value
High

Tales Of Arise

A work of astral art

9.25

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 340

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco **Developer** Bandai Namco **Release** September 10 **Rating** T

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Help bridge the gap between two warring cultures while making life-long bonds with diverse comrades

» Graphics
Character models look gorgeous during cutscenes, but an eye-popping feast of elemental attacks and sword swipes emerge as the most memorable visuals once encounters are initiated

» Sound
Your fighters incessantly announce their activated abilities which is irritating after spamming hundreds of attacks during longer engagements

» Playability
Artes, boost attacks, and boost strikes are mapped nicely to face buttons and the d-pad so increasing the combo/damage counter is as easy as waiting for a cooldown to finish. Boss battles, on the other hand, require better resource management

» Entertainment
There's a lot to do in Tales of Arise: set up camp, hook some fish, help townsfolk with missions of varying importance, and more. The main plot is incredible, but the secondary stories you uncover are far more exciting

» Replay Value
Moderate

Bandai Namco's Tales franchise has unwaveringly upheld time-worn visuals and mechanics throughout its storied 25-year history. Anime-inspired art, high fantasy settings, linear motion battle iterations, and character-focused interactions are all synonymous with past entries, but these qualities are both a gift and a curse, establishing the JRPG series as a unique, albeit less successful, alternative to mainstream hits like Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest. Tales of Arise is a significant evolutionary step. Smart gameplay changes, Unreal Engine 4 augmentations, and a mature narrative with an engaging roster of playable characters revitalize the series in ways that can't be ignored. The latest adventure in the Tales saga more than rises to the occasion.

When I wasn't raising livestock for stat-boosting meal ingredients or bringing rare ore to local blacksmiths, I was fishing in some secluded paradise or interacting with stray owls in exchange for goofy cosmetics. A bevy of engaging side activities is a welcome reprieve because Tales of Arise is anything but a low-stakes journey. I spent dozens of hours wading through intense sociopolitical issues like racism, authoritarianism, and mental illness (specifically, PTSD). These central motifs thoughtfully catalyze character motivations and never felt like shallow gimmicks.

A centuries-long race war between technologically adept Renans and the naturalistic Dahnans has culminated in labor camps, surveillance states, and rampant hate crimes. Regardless of their ethnic differences and unpredictable feelings toward one another, protagonists Alphen and Shionne are peas in a pod; the amnesiac warrior literally can't feel pain, and the gun-toting fashionista inflicts nothing but pain. Watching the two grow closer over the course of their arduous mission to enact positive change was a narrative highlight.

The remarkable level of sophistication present in Arise's story is also expressed visually. Dahna's realms house magnificent geographical structures like sizzling canyons overlooking lava lakes and winter wonderlands with sparkling sheets of snow. I appreciated not having to stray too far off the beaten path to find chests or secret awe-inspiring views. Still, dungeon segments like age-old sewer systems, abandoned ruins, and multi-floor castles that relied on dry puzzle designs were obvious rough patches – finding keys to remove obstructions or acquire other dull, progression items got old quickly.

Combat, of course, is the draw of the experience and makes up for some of Tales of Arise's mundane environments. Victories stem from elemental weaknesses, astral arte (or magic) usage, well-timed "boost attacks" that call on party members to incapacitate foes single-handedly, and team-finishers called "boost strikes." Micromanagement is key to progressing. Additionally, simple button inputs and a free camera streamline the action. Nothing beats juggling a wild boar midair then having the party's resident martial artist, Law, swoop in with a flying kick or your unparalleled arte caster, Rinwell, batter multiple adversaries with beams of fire.

Tales of Arise offers a plethora of avenues to prepare for its toughest engagements – eating meals at rest points for bonus attribute points, customizing party behaviors to prioritize healing artes, and traditional grinding, which, when coupled with "battle chain" effects, meant that the more monsters I'd encounter in a row, the higher chance I'd have of netting better rewards or finding high-tier challengers. Having a varied assortment of options to progress was always empowering, even when I cleared these harrowing battles by the skin of my teeth.

Tales of Arise harmoniously balances beloved systems like visual novel-inspired skits and upgradable titles with new-and-improved gameplay tweaks. Intricate world-building in sub-quests and even mundane discussions help with pacing and narrative cohesion. Campy JRPG-centric themes like the power of friendship and slow-burn romantic tension are prevalent throughout. Nevertheless, I found myself completely invested in the tragedies and achievements the cast faced, even when awkward pauses and stiff cutscene animations threatened to break immersion. Tales of Arise is a fantastic reinvention of Bandai Namco's tried and true formula. It might even be the best installment in the franchise to date.

» **Jason Guisao**

Kena: Bridge Of Spirits

One of the best adventures of the year

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ember Lab **Developer** Ember Lab **Release** September 21 **Rating** E10+

9

From the moment Kena's staff ignites with magnificent magic, the world around her sizzles with excitement, creating an enchanting atmosphere for one of the best adventure games I've played in recent memory. Kena: Bridge of Spirits is Ember Lab's debut game, but it hits with the sophistication and beauty you'd expect from a studio that's been doing this for decades.

With environmental puzzles around almost every bend and secrets waiting for those who can solve them, Bridge of Spirits has a strong heart for adventure. It constantly pounds as you discover new areas, each beat pulling you in different directions to unearth hidden treasures and items that will help rejuvenate a fallen society.

Kena (pronounced "Kay-nuh") is an inexperienced Spirit Guide who must locate wayward souls reluctant to leave this mortal coil. Before sending them on their way, she needs to learn about their lives, and ultimately what happened to them. Their pasts are unearthed by exploring the land, and you learn of their triumphs and hardships through brief flashbacks that make the story sing in intriguing ways and help flesh out its key players. Many of these revelations play out within beautifully animated story sequences that swell with emotion, amplified by an outstanding soundtrack featuring traditional Balinese music. I found myself humming along to the excellently composed low-key, ambient melodies, some sung by Ayu Larassanti, the same actress that brings Kena's voice to life.

Be prepared to enter photo mode numerous times during your playthrough; Bridge of Spirits is as beautiful as games come, and that beauty encourages exploration – you'll want to see all of this world. Ember Lab's artists make every little detail pop, whether within the sprawling forest Kena journeys through or the little creatures she meets along the way. These adorable little blobs are called Rot and are one of the game's most sought-after collectibles. They play a massive role in both the gameplay and story, but more importantly, they wear cute hats (another item to track down). You don't know what the Rot are or why they're helping Kena, but you keep gathering them (up to 100 in total) and hope they continue to be your allies as the story unfurls.

As Kena bounds through the sun-soaked forest, she'll come across areas of corruption littered with thorns, muck, and gray vines leading up a red, pulsating blob called a Tangled Heart. When Kena enters these locations, enemies materialize from red mist. Throughout the entire game, Kena only uses her staff to take down these foes, but this simple weapon is about as adaptable as they come.

Kena's movements are swift, and the staff's melee strikes land with a satisfying wallop. She can evasive roll, block, and perform parry's to stun her adversaries. These combat sequences hum with intensity, are loads of fun and expand with complexity as Kena learns to use the staff in new ways.

Some of the staff's augmentations unlock via purchases, but the most significant additions unlock through the story. Kena learns how to turn her staff into a bow and channel its powerful energy to create bombs. Tagging an enemy with a carefully placed bomb is good fun, but the bow is the true star of combat. It feels incredible and is designed with pinpoint precision in mind. When Kena leaps into the air and pulls back the bowstring, time slows, allowing for an arrow to hit the exact spot you want – whether it's a small weak spot on the chest or a hanging lantern below a galloping behemoth. Landing these shots is an empowering experience, and the game tasks you to do it constantly.

The Rot, those adorable companions I mentioned earlier, play a significant role in combat. They can heal Kena, stun enemies, and are also game-changers against bosses. These conflicts turn the difficulty to 11 and demand perfection in your timing and strategies. Don't be surprised if these bosses throw you around like a ragdoll, and you die often. The leap in difficulty is surprising and is one of the areas where the game struggles a bit. The difficulty setting is switchable at any point, but with unsatisfying results – moving from blistering intensity to cakewalk; the gulf in the challenge is too big.

Bridge of Spirits also leans a little too heavily on the same puzzle mechanics, especially in the late game where almost every vertical movement pushes Kena to throw a bomb and detonate it with an arrow to create a path forward. While I appreciate how clever the puzzles are and how fluid the platforming is, using the same motions gets tiring and saps some of the fun out of the exploration.

Ember Lab was upfront about Kena's length going into release, saying it could be completed in a weekend. Given how much I adore this experience, I wish it lasted longer, but the shorter footprint works well, especially for seeing all the world has to offer. The final act is the only aspect that feels rushed. The story wraps up nicely (in ways I didn't expect), but a few of the big reveals and conflicts come and go in a flash and aren't given the same level of care as other moments in the game.

Bridge of Spirits stumbles a little yet confidently sprints into the heart of the adventure, rewarding the player with secrets galore and visuals almost always worth admiring. If you love Zelda-like games or are just looking for an experience that will make you smile every step of the way, you can't go wrong with Kena: Bridge of Spirits. » **Andrew Reiner**

PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Concept**
A rewarding adventure that encourages exploration and hits hard with combat and puzzles

» **Graphics**
A beautiful journey that catches your eye with its stylish characters, lush forest, and jaw-dropping next-gen lighting. Little touches like seeing the Rot find places to relax add a playfulness to the already impressive visuals

» **Sound**
Composer Jason Gallaty and the ensemble group Gamelan Çudamani made a score that hums from start to finish. The voice acting and adorable Rot mumbles are also fantastic

» **Playability**
Combat and environmental puzzles deliver plenty of thrills, but repetition is a problem in the final act

» **Entertainment**
The world is fun to explore, and your time is rewarded with secrets galore and hats for your little Rot followers

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Lost Judgment

Three cheers for sweet revenge

7.25

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **Release** September 24 **Rating** M

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Investigate a murder case across two open-world cities by tracking leads, finding clues, and beating up lots and lots of people

» **Graphics**
Lost Judgment features well-directed and striking cutscenes. Walking around the environment also looks excellent on new-gen consoles

» **Sound**
Lost Judgment's cast is consistently well-acted, bringing to life the game's lengthy story

» **Playability**
Combat is one of Lost Judgment's highlights, though the new stealth and parkour systems are rudimentary and poorly implemented

» **Entertainment**
I found a lot to love in the game, but its sloppy handling of sexual assault left a bad taste in my mouth. After a run of great games from developer RGG, Lost Judgment isn't quite up to snuff

» **Replay Value**
Low

Is revenge ever justified? Can a person take justice into their own hands and live with the weight of their choice, or should it always be left to a flawed judicial system that can and will betray the people it's designed to protect? These are the questions at the heart of Lost Judgment, the latest game from Yakuza developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio and sequel to its 2019 detective-action brawler Judgment.

***Warning:** This text contains spoilers to the story, as well as mentions of sexual assault.*

Lost Judgment's story focuses on two major topics: justice and revenge. Yagami's journey explores how these two concepts are intertwined. Throughout dozens of hours, the game examines what people are willing to do in search of justice, the failings of the criminal justice system, and how society often fails victims of violence and abuse.

Lost Judgment tackles difficult topics like bullying, murder, and suicide. While it shows the often brutal and tragic realities in excruciating detail, it approaches sensitive issues with care and empathy. Lost Judgment highlights real-world issues, how they affect people, and offers potential solutions for these problems. The game's cast, full of new and returning characters, brings the story to life through well-acted cutscenes. I especially loved the antagonists, who were always painted sympathetically despite doing evil things. I found myself commiserating with them, even if I disagreed with their actions. Lost Judgment's care and grace in navigating these topics is refreshing, and I enjoyed playing through a story that treats them maturely and smartly – with one major exception.

Lost Judgment's handling of sexual assault is a mess. Following the #MeToo movement, a storyline where a woman lies about sexual assault is, frankly, irresponsible and reinforces negative views towards women who come forward with stories of abuse. While Lost Judgment explores her motivations for lying, using sexual assault as a plotline, in this case, feels weak and shocking for the sake of shock. This is especially egregious when the narrative tosses that character aside once her usefulness as a plot device is over, forgoing any resolution to her character arc. I found this plot beat incredibly disappointing in a game that otherwise took care to approach storytelling sensitively. This cast a shadow over the rest of my playthrough, souring me on a story I otherwise enjoyed. I truly hated engaging with all of these moments in the game.

Lost Judgment's action should be familiar if you've played RGG's other games, such as the Yakuza series or the first Judgment. You spend a lot of your time walking around two open worlds – Kamurocho and Ijincho – getting into brutal street fights and chasing story threads around town. Judgment's investigation mechanics carry over from the previous game and largely remain unchanged; you look around for clues and later present those clues as evidence. Like the first game, this is a nice way to break up combat-focused sections.

Lost Judgment introduces two new mechanics to the series: stealth and parkour. Both are poorly implemented and tedious. Stealth is rudimentary and linear – go to this hiding spot, throw a coin to lure guards away, rinse and repeat. Parkour is somewhat engaging, but the game frequently forces you into investigation mode to find the handholds you need to get around an area. This kills the pacing, especially during the game's climax, where I constantly needed to stop so I could search around for where to climb.

Combat is the highlight of Lost Judgment's gameplay. Yagami is fluid and fast, and the inclusion of the three different fighting types from the first game, which you can swap between on the fly, feels fantastic. I loved encountering a room of enemies and using the three styles to take out each person systematically – especially Snake, which allows for quick take-downs and the ability to disarm enemies. RGG's iconic heat actions return, and they are as brutal and over-the-top as ever. I loved the combat in Lost Judgment so much that I often found myself just walking around the open world looking for trouble.

By the time credits rolled, I had trouble sorting out my feelings. On the one hand, Lost Judgment's story is moving, and I enjoyed exploring the characters' emotions. There were parts I simply loved playing, such as beating the holy hell out of bad guys. But at the end of the day, Lost Judgment commits a few unforgivable sins. Its handling of sexual assault is wildly irresponsible, and the new gameplay mechanics do little to help it stand out over RGG's other games. If you're already invested in the Judgment series or the studio's games in general, then I'd still say check it out. But don't expect this journey into Japan's underworld to have nearly the impact of a game like Yakuza 0 or Like A Dragon.

» **Blake Hester**

Life Is Strange: True Colors

More powerful in life lessons than supernatural talents

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Deck Nine Games **Release** September 10 **Rating** M

Life is Strange has always been about emotions and coping with life's challenges. Through the series, we've experienced different perspectives and many complex situations, from the perils of depression to the ugliness of racism. While Life is Strange: True Colors has all the hallmarks of past entries, like having a special power and consequences for your actions, it's more fueled by its emotional moments and realistic dilemmas. This is when the game is at its best, bringing a fantastic, well-written protagonist in Alex Chen, who you want to get to know and see succeed.

You can think of Alex as the new kid on the block. The journey begins with Alex leaving the group home she's stayed at for the last eight years to live with her brother Gabe in Haven Springs. Unfortunately, an accident happens, and Gabe dies. From here on out, Alex is on a mission to make sense of his death. Could it have been prevented?

The story has some good twists and is especially strong in how it explores Alex's past in the foster care system and her family issues. The narrative is emotional, dealing with grief, abandonment, and self-worth, but it's also just as much about finding your own path in life. The latter really comes together nicely in the final moments, letting you have a considerable impact on what Alex's future holds. I enjoyed the narrative's suspense and heartwarming moments, but it's the characters that truly make the experience.

Alex Chen is one of the best protagonists I've encountered in years, and it comes down to her resilience and undying hope for the better. Voice actress Erika Mori gives Alex an emotional depth that cannot be overstated: Her delivery is spot-on for Alex's charming sarcasm, and when Alex is at her most vulnerable during emotional scenes, Mori never overacts, keeping you right in the moment and feeling for Alex and her circumstances.

The people around Alex also made me feel connected to the town and her journey. All the residents of Haven Springs are like a protective family, from father figure Jed, who gives Alex a place to stay rent-free, to the grandmotherly and overly affectionate Eleanor, who just wants to see everyone happy. They all have their issues that you can choose to uncover more about, but what's so touching is they'd do anything for a fellow. It works well as a contrast to Alex's previous life, where she had to fend for herself and never felt a true belonging.

The majority of Alex's adventure is story-based, giving you dialogue options as you explore the town and try to piece together certain clues about people and places. The game offers a lot of exploration, so you're best to go off the beaten path to get the most out of it. Everything you do fits well into the plot, including a fun LARP romp through town, a Spring Festival, and even taking a job as a waiter. Learning about the people is part of the fun, and making choices about how to play scenes or handle situations keeps you involved in the plot.

The tricky decisions come with Alex's power. Alex understands the emotions of others on a very different level. She has a supernatural ability to experience, absorb, or manipulate feelings. It's a power of empathy, but it's not exactly what I was expecting, and I found the power a bit disappointing in its effort to be more supernatural. Alex can straight-up read people's minds to learn if something deeper is going on.

Issues of consent aside, using her power felt like cheating and avoiding the difficult work of trying to get someone to open up to you about their problems. I struggled the most with instances where you can decide whether to take feelings away from others. For example, if fear prevents someone from standing up for themselves, should you intervene? Or is that work they need to do for themselves? My biggest issue is that the game gives you such a huge responsibility with this power but shies away from taking a hard stance on the emotional ramifications at play.

True Colors' writing is so strong that it didn't need a supernatural ability to tell this story. I laughed, I cried, and the things that stick with me are the moments where Alex is tested and comes into her own. Due to all branching choice variations, you can probably get in a few different playthroughs, but the overall message never changes: Don't give up. It may be a well-worn saying, but it means a lot in Alex Chen's pained life.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

8.5

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Stadia

» **Concept**
Step into the shoes of Alex Chen as she enters a new chapter of her life and must deal with her brother's unexpected death while harnessing her supernatural power of empathy

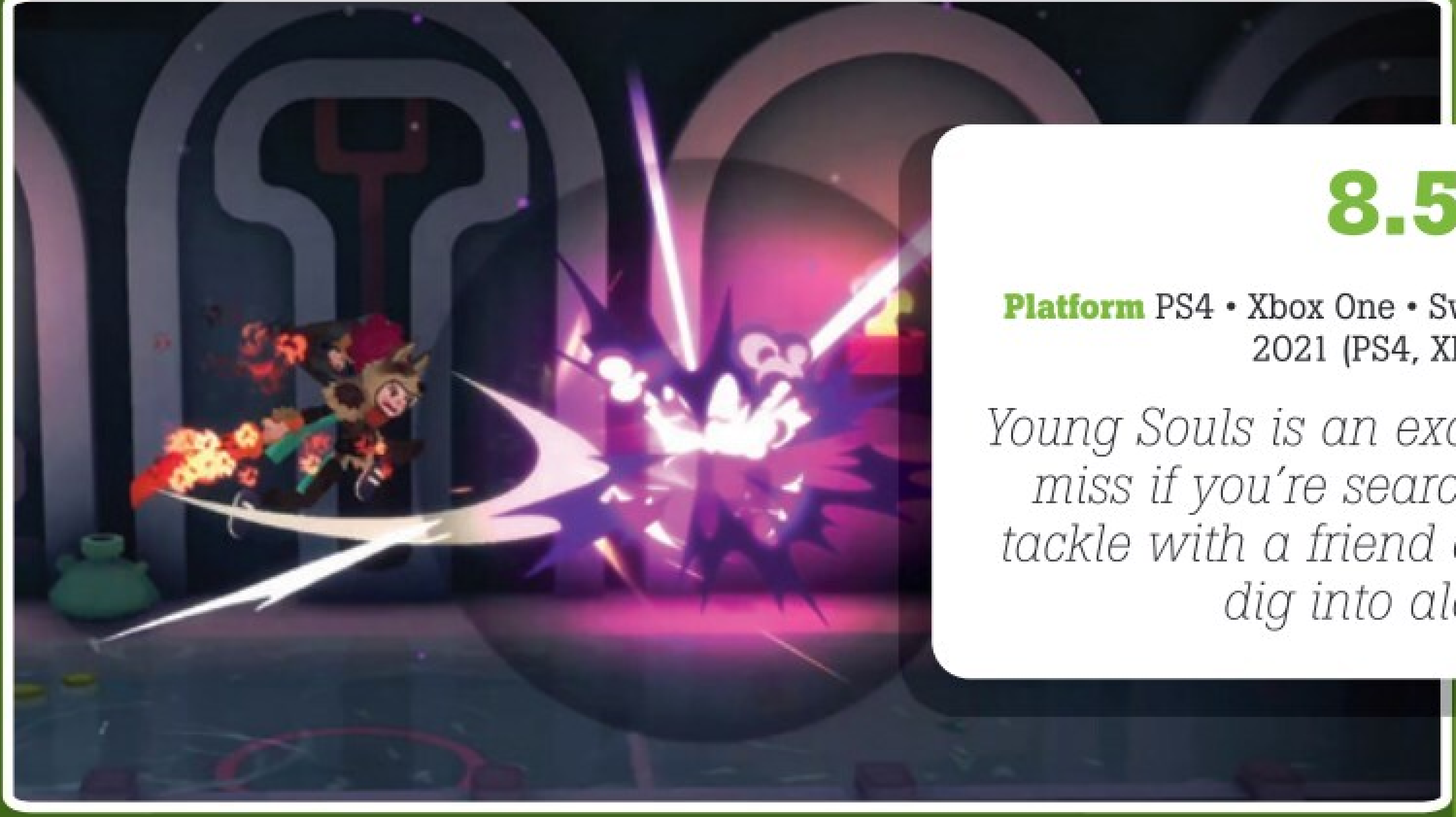
» **Graphics**
An impressive upgrade in the visual department, the characters' realistic facial expressions and mannerisms, especially their eye movement, add to the authenticity of each moment

» **Sound**
The soundtrack doesn't disappoint, with fitting songs to color the world and emotional stakes. The voice acting is also spectacular; Erika Mori gives an exceptional performance, showcasing the emotional complexity of Alex

» **Playability**
True Colors is an easy game to pick up and play, and it's great to see accessibility options that let you decide on aspects such as longer timer choices and volume warnings

» **Entertainment**
Life is Strange: True Colors is a powerful adventure, full of twists and thoughtful yet heartbreaking subject matter. You'll root for Alex Chen and feel good about helping shape her path forward

» **Replay Value**
High



8.5 Young Souls

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Stadia • PC **Release** August 17 (Stadia), 2021 (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC) **Rating** M

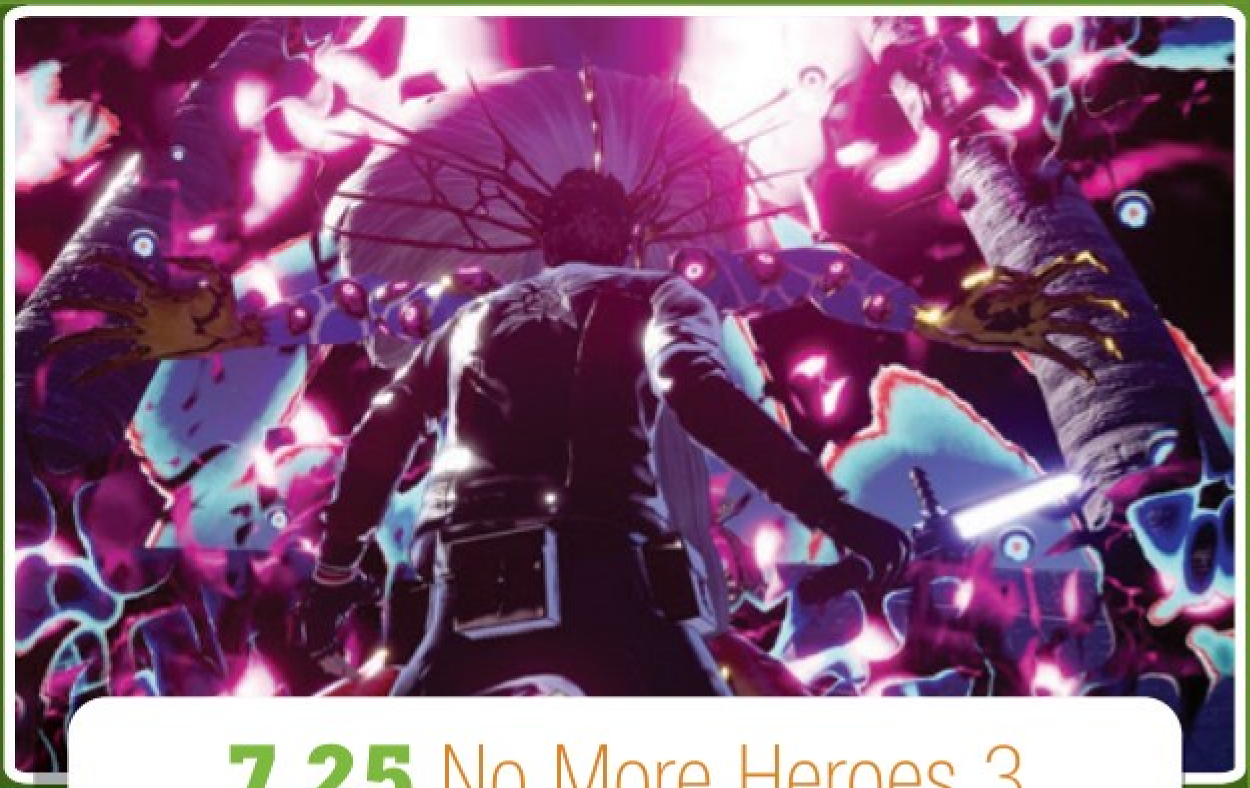
Young Souls is an exceptional adventure you shouldn't miss if you're searching for the next great game to tackle with a friend or want a quality RPG brawler to dig into alone. – Marcus Stewart

STARGORDON'S
Midnight Whirl

8.5 The Artful Escape

Platform Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC
Release September 9 **Rating** E10+

Like its protagonist, The Artful Escape leans into its unique identity and comes out the better for it. The game is breathtakingly beautiful, rich in music, and makes you feel like an intergalactic rock star while examining some thoughtful, relatable fears. – Jill Grodt



7.25 No More Heroes 3

Platform Switch **Release** August 27 **Rating** M

My time with No More Heroes 3 jumped between the short highs of entertaining bosses and cutscenes to long, ugly stretches in the world. Much of the design is dated, and I wanted to drop it after a few bosses to avoid the mundanity, but I'm happy I saw it to completion. – John Carson

8.25 Lost In Random

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release September 10 **Rating** E10+

Lost in Random has a lot to offer at any time, but the game's bizarre world and characteristic, spooky atmosphere make it an excellent pick for the Halloween season. – Jill Grodt

Visit gameinformer.com for the full reviews

8.5 F.I.S.T.: Forged In Shadow Torch

Platform PS5 • PS4 • PC **Release** September 7 **Rating** E10+

F.I.S.T. offers another fine example of an exploration-focused side-scroller, and fans of the genre will find plenty to love. What it lacks in innovation, it makes up for by executing familiar ideas at a high level and dropping them into an alluring world. – Marcus Stewart

7.75 WarioWare: Get It Together!

Platform Switch **Release** September 10 **Rating** E10+

WarioWare: Get It Together's lively visuals are temporarily engaging, but this candy shell has a hollow center; like any sugary snack, the experience doesn't stick with you. – Ben Reeves

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with the print issue to follow

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Trick Or Treat: Gaming Edition

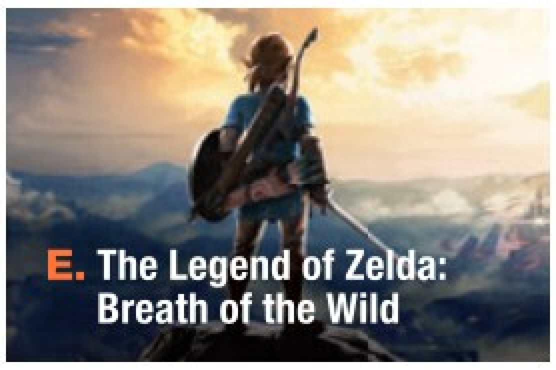
We're getting closer to Halloween, a time for spooky decorations, wild costumes, and of course, delicious candy. But there's always the chance to get a gross trick instead of a nice treat, especially in video games. With this in mind, we've gathered a list of games that you might want to cross off your trick-or-treat list. See if you can match the titles below to their grossest snacks and sweetest delicacies. ***by Jill Grodt***

A. Red Dead Redemption 2

B. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

C. Minecraft

D. The Outer Worlds



E. The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

F. Fallout 4

G. Valheim

H. Genshin Impact

1. ___ Sweet Roll & Charred Skeever Meat
2. ___ Queens Jam & Grilled Neck Tail
3. ___ Mint Jelly & Suspicious Imported Poultry
4. ___ Honey Candies & Dubious Food
5. ___ Bubblegum & Iguana Bits
6. ___ Chocolate Bar & Assorted Salted Offal
7. ___ Purpleberry Bunch & Cystypig Tumors
8. ___ Enchanted Golden Apples & Spider Eye

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